●ヤマグチノボル

1972年2月茨城県生まれ。『カナリア～この想いを歌に乗せて』（角川スニーカー文庫）でデビュー。『魔法薬売りのマレア』（角川スニーカー文庫）、『ゼロの使い魔』シリーズ（MF文庫J）、『サンタ・クラリス・クライシス』（富士見ファンタジア文庫）など、レーベルの枠を越えて活躍中。
空が好きです。大空を飛び回ることを夢想しながら生きてきました。

カバーイラスト／島田フミカネ
カバーデザイン／沼利光（D式 Graphics）

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ヤマグチノボル ■ 島田フミカネ & Projekt Kagonish 原作
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ストライクウィッチーズ スオムスいらん子中隊がんばる
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ストライクウィッチーズ
STRIKE WITCHES
スオムスいらん子中隊がんばる
STRIKE WITCHES
Shimada Humikane & Projekt Kagonish
The world had received the attack from the existence of the mystery that appeared suddenly.
Only girls who have magic can fight against them.
They install arms on an own body, and fight in the sky, the land, and the sea.
Fights of girls who defend the world start now.
著：ヤマグチノボル
原作：島田フミカネ & Projekt Kagonish
CAUTION
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ストライクウィッチーズ
スオムスいらん子中隊がんばる

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Strike Witches - Suomus Misfits Squadron - Volume 01 - Suomus Misfits Squadron Moving Up

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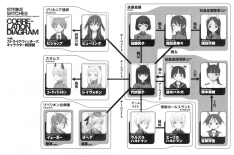
- 

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Prologue

“Hey, over there, isn’t that a Witch?”

The alpine trooper removed his goggles and peered out from under his tousled hair as he spoke. Below the large and heavy clouds, there was a small spot flying in those Northern European skies.

“That’s no bird. It’s way too fast.”

The trooper next to him muttered to himself. Behind the goggles used to prevent snow-burn, his eyes were those of a young man. Clearing his ears, he could hear the faint drone of a magic engine.

“I knew it. It’s a Witch! The mechanized air infantry! Heh, must be my lucky day! I wonder if she’s here patrolling as well. Hats off to her, working in this freezing cold!”

The two alpine troopers were part of the Rajavartiolaitos Border Patrol, on duty along the border between Suomus and Neuroi territory.

Recently, these patrol rotations had become much more frequent. After waving to that distant spot in the sky, the two troopers turned back to their own problems, grumbling in a worried manner.

“Even those Air Force Witches are getting deployed, huh... I wonder, maybe that rumor is really true? That those damn Neuroi ‘monsters’ are gonna attack Suomus...”

The alpine trooper with the tousled hair frowned. He fished a cigarette from out of a pocket, and lit it with a match.

“They’re supposed to have their hands full with Karlsland already.”

The tousle-haired alpinist answered, and exhaled a large cloud of smoke together with a frosty sigh. His answer seemed to be more a question for himself, rather than to serve as an actual answer.

“Who would do something as stupid as opening up another war front like that?”

After the end of the First Neuroi War in 1917, more than 20 years of silence had passed, when the ‘alien army’ known as the Neuroi suddenly began an invasion of Central Europe two months ago in September 1939. Ostmark, drunk from the peace it had settled into, was wiped out in one strike, and the Neuroi began a blitzkrieg invasion into Karlsland. Starting with the European countries, soon the entire world was trembling at the Neuroi assault. Currently, a hopeless defensive war was being fought along the Karlsland-Ostmark border.

The Neuroi invasion was ferocious, and in the opinion of many it was only a matter of time until Karlsland would be overrun.

Nations across the world have continued to send reinforcements, but up to now, nothing could be done to hold back the mighty Neuroi army.

The Neuroi were terrifying enemies.

They were not simply ‘powerful’ or anything else, there was another reason.

The other trooper, with a worried expression on his face, put that other reason into words.

“Opening up another front... normally, nobody would do something as stupid as that. But, those things aren’t human. We’ve got no idea what they're thinking. Dammit, they’re not like us.”

The tousle-haired trooper threw down his cigarette. As it fell to the deeply packed snow, the cigarette went out with a fizzling sound.

The snowy field the two were standing in was on a river bank which ran along the country’s border, on a gently sloping hill. On the other side of the frozen river, was Neuroi territory..... or actually just land. They could not believe that the Neuroi even had the concept of ‘territory’. The troopers shivered as he looked at the overgrown forest further back. Long ago, that country was said to be the home of werewolf tribes. But... the current masters of that land were now known by the name of that country, *they* were the Neuroi.

They shrouded the Neuroi territory in a noxious miasma, changing it into a barren uninhabitable land. And now, they seemed to be intent on spreading that miasma over the rest of Europe. No one knew their purpose in doing so.

“Shit... nobody wants to have their homeland covered in that poison...”

The tousle-haired trooper tried to cheer up his muttering comrade.

“Well, I’m sure the Witches’ll be able to do something about it.”

“Let’s hope so.”

The trooper gazed up into the sky. The spot from before was hidden by the bulky clouds hanging in the sky. He felt as if the ashen sky was hinting at the future of his homeland. His gaze remained on the sky for a long time, as prayer-like thoughts went through his mind.

Luutnantti Elma Leivonen, of the Suomen Ilmavoimat, was flying in the deep blue sky 8000 feet above the alpinists, the fine golden hair unique to Northern Europe fluttering about her head. That she was flying was easy to say, but her appearance, that of a young girl flying through the sky as if it were normal, was like that of a mythical Valkyrie.

Her legs were a pale white, like a slender column of snow. On those legs, a dilapidated FAROT manufactured magic engine was glowing. A magic engine..... a mechanical unit which converts the user’s magic energy, and makes flight possible.

Flying through the skies by magic... She was a mechanized air infantryman, a Witch.

“This is Skylark, this is Skylark. ‘Snow Woman,’ do you copy?”

Ltn. Elma Leivonen called out over the throat-type radio extending up to her mouth. She had already repeated the same message who knows how many times, but call-sign “Snow Woman” at Kauhava Aerial Combat Academy had yet to respond.

Miserably, Ltn. Elma spoke out in a tearful voice again.

“.....Uuuu, this is made in Karlsland, the pinnacle of manufacturing, too... I wonder if it’s broken. It’s definitely because of this cold. This is my homeland

no matter how I look at it, but why does it have to be so cold?!”

Ltn. Elma shivered. The ice- and snow-filled sky 8000 feet above Suomus was enveloped in freezing cold. Because she was cruising at a speed of 150 knots, the temperature she actually felt was unimaginable. Flying in one of the coldest places in the world, nearly naked with just a thin flight suit, the only reason it was even possible was magic, that power dwelling only in some women.

“‘Snow Woman’, please! Come in! Pleeeeease come in!”

Ltn. Elma shouted into the throat microphone.

“This is ‘Snow Woman’. I can hear you.”

At last, an answer. It was a cold, female voice. There was no doubt that it was Control Officer Kapteeni Häkkinen, also known as the Snow Woman. Her composure and coolness never failed to carry through, no matter what the situation. She was often called Snow Woman or other names, and that soon became her call-sign.

“Why didn’t you answer earlier? It’s so cold up here, I thought I was going to cry!”

“Call sign.”

Having that said to her, Ltn. Elma suddenly remembered. In order to differentiate friend from foe, she had been lectured on guidelines for radio use that morning in the briefing room. *I’m in for it now*, she thought, as she cursed her own carelessness, and mumbled a line from one of Verlaine’s poems.

“The long moans of the violins of autumn.”

Then, she tapped her throat microphone twice. The signal they had agreed on for “sent.”

‘Snow Woman’ replied after that.

“The snowy winds of Suomus, the cold which sinks into the flesh.”

Uuuuuuuuuuuuu, not like you’re feeling the cold.

Imagining ‘Snow Woman’ sitting haughtily in the command center, with the glow of several stoves burning merrily, Ltn. Elma wanted to voice at least one of her complaints. But of course, she did not. She was too chicken-hearted for that.

“‘Snow Woman’ confirmed. Situation report to follow.”

Kapt. Häkkinen’s voice buzzed from the large wireless receiver over Ltn. Elma’s ears.

“‘Skylark’ confirmed. You are clear to report. By the way, the stoves are not in use.”

“Eh? Ehhhh?”

“It’s obvious what you’re thinking, Luutnantti. I’m not going to be relaxing someplace warm while directing your flight out there.”

She’s a shrewd woman, Ltn. Elma thought, as she began her report.

“Karelia region, point A-3. Heading north along the border. Altitude, 8000 feet, no abnormalities detected.”

“Are you making sure to check the ground as well?”

Ltn. Elma stared down at the forest on the other side of the river on the border.

“Yes. So intently that not even a single fox would go undetected. Just like always.”

She could not feel anything suspicious in the shadows of those snow-packed conifers. However... Ltn. Elma could not help but feel uneasy about the stillness.

Across that river, it was no longer human land.

‘Neuroi’

Those mysterious beings, which had taken the name of the area where they first appeared. That was now a separate world, where they ruled unchecked.

“Um... Kapteeni Häkkinen.”

“‘Snow Woman’”

“Er, right, ‘Snow Woman’. Can I ask a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Will the Neuroi really attack us?”

“That’s not something I can know, nor is it something you should be thinking about.”

Silence.

Then, a sigh.

In a resigned tone of voice, Kapt. Häkkinen gave another answer.

“Well, if you want my personal opinion.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“They really will attack, won’t they.”

“Oh no...”

Ltn. Elma felt the misery welling up again.

“They’re attacking Karlsland right now though, bunches and bunches of them too, so...”

“The ‘Neuroi’ are not human. We have no idea how many of them there are. And taking into account what we’ve learned from the few battles we’ve had, they have nothing against personal sacrifice, nor do they have any use for diplomacy. In other words, as long as we’re bordering them, sooner or later, they will certainly come.”

Kapt. Häkkinen stated that simply, in a voice without any concern in it whatsoever, as if she were saying that the neighbors would be bringing some food to share.

“Sigh... if such a frightening enemy comes, don’t you wonder what’s going to

happen to all of us...”

“No matter what happens, we’re relying on all of you.”

“Oh no...” Ltn. Elma said, as a weak note crept up in her voice again.

“There’s nothing we can do about it, you know. The only ones who can get near the Neuroi, enveloped in that miasma, are ‘Witches’ like you.”

That was how it was. The mechanized air infantry were seen as the trump cards against the Neuroi for that reason. Normal soldiers could never even get close to the Neuroi.

Ltn. Elma sighed.

“But, it’s really worrying, with ‘just’ us around...”

“Exactly as you say, Luutnantti. That is a grave matter of concern for all of us.”

“There are only three squadrons of mechanized air infantry in the Ilmavoimat, you know? How are we supposed to protect this entire, long border with just that?!”

The border between Suomus and Neuroi was many thousands of kilometers long from north to south. It was impossible with just three squadrons, no matter what.

“The government has sent requests to every nation requesting support. Requesting not only Strikers, but the Witches to operate them as well.”

Ltn. Elma’s face lit up.

“R-Really!? That’s great news, isn’t it!”

It was good news indeed.

In order to defend against the Neuroi invasion, Suomus had previously received shipments of armed Strikers from nations around the world, but it was always up to themselves to find the personnel to operate them. Now... they were finally getting the ‘Witches’ to go with them as well.

“That’s right. Britannia, Karlsland, the United States of Liberion, the Fuso

Empire... it seems they'll each be choosing some of their best mechanized air infantry to send."

Those were all some of the most powerful nations in the world. Elite soldiers were going to come at long last.

They were definitely going to be a reliable bunch, soldiers who could stand against a thousand enemies by themselves!

"Yes! Suomus will be safe as well now!"

"Yes! Suomus will be safe as well now!"

With her spirits raised a hundred-fold, Ltn. Elma cheered, and spun around joyfully into a barrel roll. The vapor trail coming from her magic engine painted the ashen sky in faint, rainbow-colored splendor.

Maritime State Britannia.

On an island country separated from the rest of Europe by the Dover Strait, an argument which had become an everyday occurrence was taking place outside the gate to Air Force Station Pembrey.

At this late hour at night, with a shroud of darkness covering everything, a Brough Superior motorcycle was stopped in front of the gate, its idling engine puttering softly.

Riding on it was a girl with long, silver hair, which shimmered in the reflected light of the headlight. Although she could easily be described as good-looking, a certain weariness towards life could be seen in her eyes behind the goggles, and her lips were pressed into a thin, straight line. These two features gave her a hard-to-approach atmosphere, despite her good looks.

“Pilot Officer Beurling! Curfew was ages ago!”

The young female sentry shifted the Enfield rifle in her hands, and challenged the girl in a troubled voice. However, the girl called P/O Beurling merely ignored the sentry’s protest.

She took off her goggles, and took a cigarette from out of the pack in her breast pocket and held it in her mouth. The packaging on the box showed a red circle over a green field. One of the packs from the Lend-Lease shipments from Liberion to Britannia, exhausted from the war against the Neuroi.

Still holding the cigarette in her mouth, P/O Beurling began searching through her pockets. However, as she realized that she did not have a lighter, she raised her hands as if giving up, and...

“A light.”

Which she demanded from the sentry in a bored voice.

“This is no time for a light! The Commandant is in an uproar! He’s said to throw you into the stockade today!”

P/O Beurling revved up her Brough Superior in reply, and spun it around in a sharp axle turn.

“W-Wait! Pilot Officer! Where are you going!”

“The pub.”

“The PUB!? Wait! Please, wait! Before you get sent to the stockade, the Commandant said to bring you to him! And please don’t try to resist arrest and escape! We’ve even been given permission to shoot to kill!”

“With this, how many times have you broken curfew? Pilot Officer Elizabeth Beurling.”

On the other side of the desk in the Commandant’s Office, the middle-aged Commandant, his Group Captain’s insignia glinting on his rank epaulettes, glared at the Britannian Air Force’s number one trouble-maker. His teeth were grinding on a pipe in his mouth hard enough for the mouthpiece to break. As for the trouble-maker... P/O Beurling began leisurely counting off the number of times on her fingers.

“Thirty-two times. Sir.”

P/O Beurling answered unconcernedly, her face set in a matter-of-fact look.

A loud crack rang out as the Commandant bit down hard on the mouthpiece of his pipe.

“That is the 32nd one.”

“What is?”

As the Commandant threw the mangled pipe into the wastebasket, he grumbled.

“The number of pipes I’ve chewed up in that manner.”

“Little wonder.”

“And what do you mean by that ‘Little wonder’?”

“No, I’m just talking about your pipes. It’s little wonder, if they were all cheap things like something you’d get at Harrow’s.”

The Commandant glared at P/O Beurling as if she were the enemy of parents everywhere.

“I’d rather be smoking some Dunhills instead as well, if I could.”

He began looking for his pipe angrily. As he realized he had just thrown it away into the wastebasket, a blue vein on his temple began throbbing. Seeing the Commandant in such a mood, P/O Beurling took out one of her own cigarettes.

“It’s just a cigarette though.”

Seeing the design on the package, the Commandant shook his head.

“As if I’ll ever smoke Liberian tobacco.”

“I like them.”

Without a bit of reservation, P/O Beurling placed the cigarette in her mouth, took a match from the Commandant’s desk, struck it, and lit her cigarette.

“And, it’s not just breaking curfew. You’ve broken so many military regulations, if you break any more we’ll lose count. No matter how important mechanized air infantry may be to the military, don’t you think you’re letting it get to your head a bit too much? Not everyone on base thinks of you as a Piccadilly actress, Pilot Officer.”

The Commandant continued glaring at P/O Beurling while he said that, as she turned away and began puffing on her cigarette.

“I don’t believe that I’m being treated preferentially treated just because I’m a mechanized air infantryman. I will not follow orders or regulations that don’t make sense, and that just gets expressed in my attitude. Why there has to be an 8 o’clock curfew is beyond me. Isn’t it better to finish work, go have a drink and leave it at that? I do not believe that that would be something that would go well with our work in the daytime.”

The Commandant shook his head.

“Alright, I understand. It may not be satisfactory, but I understand. Then, what is your reason for refusing to upgrade your equipment? Everyone else in the

regiment has already accepted the new Spitfire, and are well on the way with training on the new model, and yet you refuse to let go of that shabby Hurricane of yours. The maintenance crews are complaining, that solely because of one person, Pilot Officer, they have to go through huge troubles to get spare parts, just for you!”

“It isn’t certain that the new models are better.”

“Speed, turning radius, high altitude performance, the Spitfire is superior to your Hurricane in any of those. What do you have against it?”

“Perhaps if you wanted to form a flying circus, it might be a good Striker unit.”

P/O Beurling continued in her usual, cool tone.

“However, the Neuroi dispatch bombers frequently. Against a heavy bomber, rather than turning rate or high-speed performance, what is more effective overall is the firing stability offered by the Hurricane. And furthermore... as a new model, the Spitfire is sure to have many problems. I’m putting my life on the line. I just want the legs I’m used to wearing, that is all.”

The Commandant’s lips trembled, as if he had something to say, but he moved on to the next topic.

“Understood. Actually, I don’t understand, but I understand your position at least. Then, next we have a bigger problem.”

“And what is that.”

“What is your reason for refusing your promotion to Flying Officer? Human Resources at Air Command are always an enigma, but well, that isn’t the problem here. What is the meaning behind your refusal to be promoted.”

P/O Beurling shook her head.

“I am not fit to command a flight.”

The Commandant beamed his first smile of the day.

“What a coincidence. This is the first time I’ve agreed with your opinion. That’s

exactly what I think as well. How well you use a Striker, or how accurate you are, none of that has anything to do with your aptitude for command. There's no doubt that those bunglers at Air Command have tunnel vision! However!"

Bam! He slammed the desk.

"An order is an order!"

"I cannot accept. I understand myself better than anyone else."

Several seconds passed. As if he was giving up, the Commandant shook his head slowly, and took two sheets of paper from his desk. One had orders for promotion to Flying Officer. And the other...

"Choose."

"Yes?"

P/O Beurling cocked her head to one side.

"Transfer, or be promoted. Choose one."

"Transfer?"

"That's right. And it's not just a simple redeployment within our borders. There isn't a single base in the Britannian Air Force that would welcome you any more. There's been a request from Suomus in Northern Europe for mechanized air infantry support. Our base will be sending one person."

"Ahh." P/O Beurling replied lifelessly.

"Is that even a choice? Cold as ice Suomus, marching in step with those foreigners, one two three four, things like that, I'm sure that's something you would be even more unhappy with."

A sneer spread across the Commandant's face, like a hunter as he chased his prey into a corner.

"If you understand, then reconsider your position, and sign the Flying Officer orders here... oi, hey! Beurling!"

Grabbing the Suomus transfer orders and a pen at the same time, P/O Beurling scrawled her signature on the orders. The Commandant turned to face the Pilot Officer directly and leaned forward, a confused look on his face.

“Pilot Officer Elizabeth Beurling, orders to transfer understood. I will depart tomorrow.”

P/O Beurling returned the transfer orders to the Commandant, and snapped a sharp salute.

“Orders understood, what... god damn you...”

The Commandant shook in rage. Being threatened with the transfer orders to Suomus that nobody in their right mind would want, even while being force-fed the Flying Officer promotion, she had still managed to go completely against expectations. Just how rebellious could this silver-haired ‘witch’ be?

P/O Beurling backed out of the Commandant’s Office without another word.

“Oi! Stop right there! Where do you think you’re going!”

His face burning bright red, the Commandant shouted after P/O Beurling.

“Bah, do what you want!”

Florida Peninsula, United States of Liberion.

An enormous warship was cruising in the warm currents near Florida.

It was called the *Lexington*, a battlecruiser converted into a fighter carrier.

In the bridge of the *Lexington*, which boasted the largest displacement in the entire Liberian Navy, the visiting Air Control Officer Commander and the Captain of the *Lexington* were watching the mechanized air infantry stationed on the ship, with matching worried expression on their faces.

The air infantry were in the middle of training, drilling at the new carrier landing procedures developed for naval air squadrons.

“Well, Commander.”

Wiping off the expression on his face, the Captain spoke out to the Commander next to him.

“What is it, Captain?”

“Now you can have those Witches stationed even on our Navy ships. An absolutely fabulous development, wouldn’t you say.”

“It’s not a new development. Although, it is true that compared to many other superpowers, our United States Navy has been riding the wave to adapting ships for these infantrywomen much more quickly...”

The Captain did not bother listening to the Commander’s explanation, which sounded more like a veiled accusation. His trance-like attention was devoted fully to the Witches training on the deck of his ship.

“Wow! Very good! Look at that blonde girl! She’s like some Hollywood musical star or something! Commander, you see! Another girl just landed! Watch out! Is she okay? Don’t fall overboard, now!

Like a grandfather fawning over his grandchildren, the Captain shouted, his hands resting on the glass panes of the bridge observation window. The Communications Officer and ensigns in the bridge stared at the Captain’s display in mute horror.

Another mechanized air infantryman swooped down to the deck, and caught hold of the cable stretching across the runway, coming in for a perfect landing. A number of sailors immediately ran up to her, and carried her to the side of the runway, where many other young girls with bright navy blue Strikers on their legs were chatting animatedly.

“Don’t you think that new regulation Striker unit that’s been assigned is a bit too stocky for those girls’ legs?”

The Captain confided to the Commander, dissatisfied.

“The F4F Wild Cat, isn’t it. It may not look like much, but it’s not a bad Striker unit by any means. It’s sturdy, and its turning radius is not bad at all.”

“I’m not talking about its abilities! Don’t you feel sorry for those girls, when they have to wear such fat boots? I would like to be able to let them wear something much smaller, something like the toe shoes a ballerina might wear!”

The Captain spun his arm around, and ordered the executive officer.

“Patch me through to the deck!”

The XO hurriedly passed the transmitter to the Captain. With his face pressed as close the glass as possible, the Captain spoke to the valkyries on the deck.

“My little darlings! You’re doing very well! Was it cold up in the sky? I’ll treat you to something nice after this, okay!”

“Yay! Thank you, Uncle Bill!”

The voices of the crowd of ‘witches’ gathered on the deck could be heard all the way in the bridge. The bridge crew shook their heads incredulously, some not for the first time. The Captain had all of the girls in the mechanized air infantry call him Uncle Bill. He was unbelievable.

“How about some ice cream? Some cola? Or maybe some donuts? We’ve got everything on my *Lexington*! Don’t hold back, so let me know if there’s anything you want!”

“Okay, Uncle Bill! We want ice cream!”

“Hmm, Rita, Vivian, Ingrid, Mary, Beth, Sally, Linda... seven of you in all?”

Squinting his eyes, the Captain counted the number of witches cluttered around the runway.

“There’s eight of us, Uncle Bill!”

“That’s right! Katharine’s not done yet!”

The Captain’s eyes gave an involuntary twitch as he heard that name.

“...That Texan country girl, huh. What happened to her?”

“She’s really taking her time landing!”

The Captain turned pale.

“...Not, not again.”

At that moment... a whooping shout rang out across the bridge’s speakers.

“Ensign Katharine O’Hare, coming in for landiiiiiiiiing!”

An ever-sunny and bright voice. As the cacophonous holler echoed about, the bridge crew covered their ears as best they could. The Captain mumbled inaudibly below his breath, dumbstruck.

“Crusher O’Hare...”

The Air Control Officer snapped to his senses first, and snatched the radio transmitter from the Captain's hands.

“Hey! Ensign O’Hare! What are you doing in the sky! Have you forgotten your three month suspension from flying!?”

“It’s so unfair of you to separate me from my buddies!”

“I don’t give a damn if it’s unfair or not! There are no more reserve units on board! Do you hear me!?”

“It’ll be fine this time! I’ll make a perfect landing! Definitely!”

Everyone could hear the absolute optimism in Ens. O’Hare’s voice. The Captain stumbled hurriedly across the bridge to the window facing the rear of the ship. He spotted a tiny blue dot diving unsteadily towards the rear of the *Lexington*. The Commander clutched his head, as he walked up to the Captain’s side.

“What the hell is with that approach! She’s veering all over the place! And that altitude! There’s no way that’s going to work! She’s going to hit the ship!”

The Captain shouted out next.

“God damn! God damn! GOD DAMN! Who let that cowgirl into the sky! Who the HELL let that Southern bumpkin join the mechanized air infantry!”

“Watch thiiiiiis! Uncle Bill!”

“Don’t you dare call me that! I don’t ever want to hear that coming from your mouth!”

The F4F wriggled towards the runway unsteadily. Katharine’s voluptuous body, which wouldn’t lose out to the volume of her Striker, could be seen from that far away. Her breasts, which could be described as stupendously large, were captivating. However, her balance while flying was made considerably more difficulty by those breasts. Her difficulty in balancing was only exacerbated as she slowed down for the landing.

The landing guidance crews bolted out to the center of the flight deck, waving red and white signal flags. Signal flags with a large ‘X’ mark on them. A mark saying that landing would be impossible, and that another approach would have to be made.

“It’ll be alriiiight! Please get back!”

“Get all seven of the arrestor wires in place! No, get the emergency net ready as well!”

The Commander shouted into the bridge transmitter, sending his orders across the entire ship.

The Captain cut in at that point, his eyes bloodshot.

“SHOOT HER DOWN! Guns free! Small caliber, large caliber, anything!! All sights on her, and open fire! Hey, HEY! GUNS FREE, I said! On the double! Or this time my *Lexington* will be the one going down!”

Neither order was given in time. Ens. Katharine O’Hare’s F4F steadily made its approach to the *Lexington*.

However, her angle of approach was much too low.

She was going to crash into the stern of the ship!

“Kyaah! Now I’ve done it!”

Both the Captain and the Commander, observing from the bridge, flinched away unconsciously, as they imagined the screeches and bangs of the inevitable crash

that was to come.

However, they didn’t hear a thing.

Did she make it? The two raised their faces to look outside.

She did not make it.

“Oopsies, too high!”

Just as Ens. Katharine was about to crash into the stern, she had pulled herself higher. Now, she was bobbing in the air dizzily above the flight deck, unsure of what to do.

“Dive into the water! Stay away from the ship!”

“Sorry! I can’t swim!”

Katharine dropped lower, and reached out a hand... and managed to grasp one of the arrestor cables, which was stretched across the runway at chest-height to assist in the landing. However, because of the reckless way she had grabbed the cable, the propellers on her Striker shot skywards at an angle away from the direction she was going.

“Kyaah! Mister Propeller! Not that way!”

To make matters worse, warning lights on the magic engine went off at that moment, and Ens. Katherine was suddenly sent flying on a path parallel to the bridge.

“Move it, move it! Please, everyone, move out of the way!”

“Eeeeeeeeeeek!”

Beside the bridge... where all of the mechanized air infantry were staring with frightened looks on their faces... the hangar where those witches were parking their Strikers.

Gragagoogooograaaashaaan!

A piercing shriek of metal clashing with metal echoed out.

“Kyaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

And the cries of those poor girls mixed with the sound of the destruction in the hangar.

In the bridge, the Captain crumpled to his knees.

“All eight of the newly issued F4F Wild Cats, totaled. Seven mechanized air infantrymen, seriously injured...”

In the center of the bridge, the disgruntled Captain was berating Ens. Katharine.

“And how is it that you are the only one who managed to come out of that without a single injury!”

In spite of having been in such a large accident, Ens. Katharine had miraculously come out of it unscathed.

“A real stroke of luck, right!”

Ens. Katharine replied, beaming a radiant smile. The Captain clutched his head in his hands, and his shoulders slumped. The Air Control Officer Commander next to him began counting something off on his fingers.

“Eight units today... So that means every last one of the 32 Strikers that were on board... Every last one.”

His faced scrunched up in anger, the Captain stabbed a finger at Ens. Katharine.

“Did you hear that? Well!? You bumbling Southern fool! Every last one of the Strikers we had on board has been destroyed! All of us would have been better off if you had just stayed home and tended your cows! Why did you ever join the navy!?”

Katharine’s face lit up, as if to say that she had been listening closely.

“Oh, me? I love the sea and the sky!”

“What?”

Pointing to the wide blue sky which could be seen outside the windows, Ens. Katherine began gushing.

“Me, I’ve been dreaming to see this for as long as I can remember in Texas! The sky so blue, and the sea so clear!”

“Which is why you joined the navy.”

“Yes! The Navy’s mechanized air infantry, they’re the best! It’s like my heart is getting cleaned by both the sky and the sea... it’s such a mind-opening experience, isn’t it!”

The Captain looked up at the roof in despair. As he silently wondered how to deal with her...

The Communications Officer darted to the Captain’s side.

“Captain! It’s from Fleet Command in Washington!”

“Let’s see.”

Taking the telegram, the Captain sped through the message, and finally put it down with a satisfied sigh.

Ens. Katharine was still bouncing about excitedly, her eyes sparkling.

“I’ll train more and more from now on! It’s my way of repaying the navy for letting me join!”

“No matter how much you may want to train, unfortunately the *Lexington* does not have a single Striker on board any more.”

“Ehhh? Is that so?”

“Don’t ‘Ehhh?’ me! Who do you think destroyed them all!? No matter how enormous the industrial output of the United States may be, we could never keep pace with you, the Crusher!”

“I’ll be careful! I’ll keep practicing my landing!”

“There’s no need for you to be careful any more, and you won’t need any more

landing training.”

“Why’s that?”

The Captain waved the telegram in his hands.

“You’re transferred.”

“Transferred? Why? Where?”

“Suomus.”

Ens. Katharine’s opened her mouth with a puzzled look.

“Suomus, where is that?”

“Northern Europe.”

“Northern Europe? Oh, next to North Dakota, wasn’t it?”

“It’s on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean!”

“Wow, that’s pretty far away. Is it warm over there?”

Ens. Katharine asked in her usual, dense tone.

“It’s a country of ice and lakes. Extremely cold.”

“Ice and lakes! Wow! That sounds pretty!”

Ens. Katharine let out an excited squeal. She would be fine with anything.

“In this telegram that just came in, we’ve been ordered to send one mechanized air infantryman stationed here at the Lexington Air Squadron to join the volunteer forces in Suomus, in Northern Europe. It’s written here, that I should choose one outstandingly skilled air infantryman, from among those we have here.”

“Outstandingly skilled... Oh no, I’m not that good at all.”

Ens. Katharine scratched her head absently, as if she were embarrassed.

“Obviously.”

“Then, why are you choosing me?”

The Captain thrusted a finger at Ens. Katharine.

“Because we cannot afford to have the entire naval air forces of the United States Navy destroyed before we fight the Neuroi!”

Karlsland, Central Europe.

Ever since the Neuroi invasion, this country has been on the front-lines of the war. The powerful Karlsländer Luftwaffe was the only reason Karlsland was still standing against the Neuroi, who had already penetrated deep into the country. Of course, the core of the Luftwaffe was made up of mechanized air infantry.

Preparations for a sortie were being hurriedly carried out at a nameless airbase near the border of Karlsland.

In the temporary briefing room set up in a large tent, the staffelkapitän was outlining the strategy that would be used to the group of mechanized air infantry assembled there.

“We have received intelligence that a formation of Neuroi bombers is heading towards Augsburg. We will intercept with all of our forces.”

The staffelkapitän, herself still only a young girl, continued with her explanation of the strategy in a dignified and professional manner.

In front of her, lines of other young girls were listening to her briefing closely, the tension clearly written in their faces even as they tried unsuccessfully to hide their nervousness. But among them... there was one girl who did not look nervous at all.

She was an incredibly small girl.

She looked to be about 12 years old. She had golden hair, which was cropped neat and short. Behind her glasses, she had deep blue eyes which glowed with

intelligence.

“Feldwebel Ursula.”

The staffelkapitän called out in an annoyed voice.

Today would be her first sortie, but Ursula had been reading a book the entire time, even with the staffelkapitän briefing her on what she would be doing.

“Feldwebel Ursula. Stop reading.”

Ursula stopped reading her book at last.

“In an actual battle, what you read in a book will be of little use to you.”

The emplaced field telephone rang at that moment.

“Yes. This is *Dritte Verteidigungsstaffel*. We will be taking off shortly, so... what, select one of them? What is this?”

The assembled pilots began muttering amongst themselves. The staffelkapitän replaced the receiver, and looked around the room.

“Well, we’ve had a transmission from headquarters, and they’ve asked us to choose one person from the staffel to serve in Suomus. Just what do they think they’re doing, asking that of an actual combat squadron in this time of crisis...”

“Did you say *Suomus*?”

The muttering among the pilots became even louder.

“Aren’t we a team! Haven’t we been training together all this time! All for today! And yet, they’re asking us to ditch one of our comrades now!”

Speaking placating words, the staffelkapitän chopped both hands downwards, cutting off the murmuring of the squadron.

“That’s what I think as well. But it seems that we must choose one person no matter what... it’s an order after all.”

The pilots stared amongst themselves. Not a single one of them wanted to be the

one chosen, and as the staffelkapitän's gaze met each of theirs in turn, each pilot would twitch as if an electric shock had shot across her back.

But no... there was one person who was acting differently.

Ursula, from before.

When the squadron noticed her, they saw that she was reading her book once again.

In the tense and uneasy silence of the tent, the only sound that could be heard was the soft scrape of the pages in the book being turned.

The staffelkapitän smiled widely.

“Feldwebel Ursula.”

Ursula raised her head away from the book again.

“Wouldn’t you like to go somewhere where you could read books all the time?”

Without a second’s hesitation, Ursula nodded.

Chapter 1 - Shou-i Anabuki Tomoko

As she increased her altitude to 3000 meters, Anabuki Tomoko felt grateful for being born a witch. Staring down at the vast scenery below her only strengthened those feelings.

The Fuso Empire... Britannia in the west, and Fuso in the east, could both be placed under similar labels. One look at the landscape below was all that was needed to know why Fuso had journeyed out of its borders so quickly. In the valleys between the mountainous region, numerous villages and towns were nestled closely together.

"This country is cramped, isn’t it," Tomoko said to herself.

However... to compare that crowded land with the openness of this sky!

Wrapped up in the embrace of the blue sky which seemed to stretch endlessly, it felt like it was a completely different world. Tomoko, the Ki-27 she had grown accustomed to on her legs, spoke out to her familiar which had united into her own body.

“Konbei, I wonder what Takeko will try today.”

“Hm, that’s right...”

The familiar’s voice appeared in her head.

As a miko, a witch of the Orient, she had chosen a fox for her familiar.

The signs of that could be seen in the light brown triangular ears she had, and the tufted tail which flapped in the wind. Covered in a soft fur, the ears and the tail gave the girl’s slender, disciplined body a decidedly feminine look.

Her long black hair reached to her waist, and a white headband was tied around her head, where the stern features of a warrior maiden from a country at war were stretched tight.

Below her skirt, shimmering whitely with a soft radiance, was the ‘Ki-27’.

It was a Striker unit which was adopted by the Fuso Imperial Army as the Type-97 Fighter Leg. With the rising trend in producing high-speed units, its top speed would never amount to much, though...

“With her superior speed, Shou-i Takeko will try to gain the initiative over ojou-sama by using a height advantage and repeatedly diving and climbing, won’t she.”

“That would be the normal way of thinking, yes.” Tomoko replied absently.

Her friend, Katoh Takeko would be using the newly adopted Ki-43... designated the Type-1 Fighter. Equipped with a 1000 spellpower ‘Ma-25’, it would have a speed advantage of nearly 30 km/h over Tomoko’s Ki-27.

“...Well then, follow my lead, just like we've always done in our dogfights .”

The new Type-1 had speed, but in a dogfight, nothing could beat the Type-97. That was how much confidence Tomoko had in her favorite machine.

She unsheathed the sword she always had at her side. It was a family heirloom passed down through the generations, a noted ‘Bizen Osafune’ sword forged as a military katana. The sword glowed with a pale light as it absorbed Tomoko’s magic.

“Wawawa, you’re not going to use the gun-camera? Are you really planning on surpassing Tomoe-Gozen?”

Konbei was asking about the gun-camera slung across Tomoko’s back, which was there in place of a 7.7 mm machine gun.

“Well... I’m sure Takeko also wants to find out which Striker will end up superior in a real ‘dogfight’.”

Tomoko replied with a smile. It was a warm smile, but at the same time it also exuded a sense of challenge. At Akeno Flight Academy, where Tomoko was stationed as a test pilot, that charming smile was the cause of the many noisy cries of ‘Onee-sama!’ by female cadets at the academy.

To the west, a small black spot could be seen in the distance.

There was no doubt that it was Katoh Takeko's Ki-43, which had taken off earlier. The challenge to this mock battle was issued just like that. This was going to go differently from the anti-ship warfare 'matches' that had been held.

As Tomoko approached, the black spot gradually formed into the shape of a mechanized air infantrywoman, her Striker shining with a metallic glint.

Facing each other head on, the two increased their pace, like two fencers eager to close the distance between them.

They approached closer and closer————

At a relative speed of nearly 600 km/h, the two passed by each other in but an instant. The Ki-43 zoomed past Tomoko's side like an arrow released from a bow. The bare duralumin frame of the compact Striker matched well with Takeko's slim physique.

Takeko's smile could be seen behind her short, black hair. The next instant, Takeko's shrill voice came through the radio receiver.

"I may be in a new model, but I won't be holding back, Tomoko."

Tomoko raised her voice as well.

"Exactly what I wanted. I'll show you that nothing can beat the Type-97 in a dogfight."

Looking behind her, Tomoko watched as Takeko pulled the Ki-43 into a sharp climb, just as she had expected.

It was a bold ascent, just like that of a powerful bird of prey, a nickname Takeko was often referred to as.

"Exactly what I'd expect from you, 'Hayabusa'."

She most likely wanted to put pressure on Tomoko by increasing her altitude. Not letting her do that, Tomoko began her own climb a moment later. Like two intertwining dragons, their paths crisscrossed as they shot upwards into the sky.

Tomoko's engine began to give out with a loud whine first. Compared to

Takeko’s Ki-43, the Ki-27 with its Ma-1b magic engine, had only 80% the engine power, and was insufficient for such a steep climb. Takeko stopped her own ascent, and flipped around. She dived.

Tomoko glanced behind herself. Takeko’s Ki-43 did another flip, as if to say that she had been waiting. She had managed to get perfectly on Tomoko’s tail. Using her superior speed, Takeko began closing the distance between them.

“How’s that? Look at the speed of the Type-1! It’s on a whole other level from the 97!”

Takeko’s voice came in from the headphones of the radio.

Following close on Tomoko’s rear, Takeko headed towards the long white streamer trailing from Tomoko’s waist, and flashed her drawn sword. It seemed that Takeko was indeed intent on not using a gun-camera.

Tomoko smiled, not disappointed.

There were two ways to decide who would win or lose in this match.

The first was to use the gun-camera to photograph the opponent. Once the required number of centered shots had been made, that would count as a ‘kill’.

The other method... Use a sword, standard equipment for the Fuso Imperial Army, to cut off the streamer that each of them had attached to their waist. It had been decided that that would count as a victory, even without using the gun-camera.

Takeko did not have her gun-camera ready... in other words, she was also aiming for the second victory condition.

Tomoko licked her lips lightly. Her sparring partner was 17, and the two of them had been rivals ever since they entered the Akeno Flight Academy in the same training cadre. Two years ago during the Neuroi invasion of Fuso, which was most likely a reconnaissance mission, the two had competed in everything from the number of enemies they had downed to promotions, during a small skirmish known as the ‘Fuso Sea Incident’.

They were the most competitive of rivals in the air, but the second they landed

they would become the best of friends, who would share all their worries, joys ,and sorrows with each other.

And because of that, neither could stand to fall behind the other.

This mock battle, which was also serving as the debut of the newly adopted Ki-43, was being closely observed by high-ranking officers from the Imperial Army, and top officials from the government of the Fuso Empire. Even visitors from the Imperial Navy had come to watch.

All of them had only one thing on their mind... Could the world's best fighter, the Ki-27, win against the newly adopted Ki-43?

As 'witches', both Tomoko and Takeko were about as skilled.

So, in other words... it was a contest between the merits of the two Strikers. Not only was Takeko's and Tomoko's own pride resting on this battle, the very identity of each of their preferred machines was on the line. For two different reasons, this was a match that could not be lost.

Takeko took advantage of her speed, and narrowed the gap between the two Strikers.

The instant they were nearly close enough to hear each other's breathing...

"I've got you now!"

Takeko's naked blade sang through the air towards the streamer hanging behind Tomoko.

"Not so easily!"

Tomoko rolled to the side, and dodged Takeko's attack.

"Kuh!"

Takeko swung her sword again. Tomoko dexterously twisted here and there as if she were dancing, keeping her streamer just out of reach of Takeko's blade.

"Dammit, you've got some talent at running away!"

Takeko’s irritated voice buzzed from the headphones.

“Come on now, what’s wrong! New model! If you keep that up, they might decide to just throw the adoption plans into the cellar, you know!”

Tomoko shouted out to Takeko, tauntingly.

“Now you’ve made me angry!”

Takeko drew her sword back.

It was a master fencer’s stance.

With that, she charged towards Tomoko.

With that, she charged towards Tomoko.

Musoushinden-ryuu, Sora-no-Tachi. (Unrivaled Pantheon style, Sword of the Heavens)

An instantaneous stroke with a katana, cleaving one’s opponent in two...

During the Fuso Sea Incident... Takeko had taken down two Neuroi craft with that secret sword technique.

Shiiing!

The bare blade flashed!

However, Tomoko was no longer there. Even her streamer had disappeared from Takeko’s view.

“Ugh!”

Takeko grunted, and spun upward.

Tomoko was there.

With a complex movement of both legs, Tomoko flipped around in a somersault to face Takeko’s rear.

At the same time as that somersault, the sword in her hand glinted.

“Kuh!”

With no time to escape, the streamer trailing behind Takeko was cut through.

‘Tsubame-gaeshi’ (Turning Swallow)

Using that maneuver, Tomoko had become the ace of the Fuso Sea Incident.

“You got me~~!”

Takeko let out a frustrated sigh. Tomoko, a huge smile on her face, was holding Takeko’s cut streamer in her hand.

“You really are ‘Tomoe-Gozen of the Fuso Sea’, aren’t you?”

That was the name that the newspapers had called Tomoko by after the Fuso Sea

Incident, where she took down seven enemies. Reporters had compared Tomoko favorably with that legendary female samurai, after she had shown her skills as a modern-day master, dancing gracefully through the skies that day slaying the Neuroi.

“Ehehe. It’s a mistake to think that there’s anything that can defeat the 97 in a dogfight.”

Tomoko twisted into a barrel roll happily.

“They might even abandon the plans to adopt that Ki-43 now.”

“That won’t happen.”

Takeko promptly refuted that possibility.

“Why? Wasn’t the whole concept of that new model based around making a better dogfighter than the Ki-27?”

“Air battles will be changing from now on. Dogfighting will no longer be the core of fighting in the sky.”

“Oh? A sore loser?”

“I’m not being sore. The trend is shifting towards high-speed, formation fighting. Winning won’t be a matter of individual skill, but instead cooperation will be the key to victory. The results from today... finally confirmed that.”

Takeko said softly, staring off into the distance. Tomoko shook her head.

“No, the one thing that will decide the course of an air battle is without a doubt the dogfight. It’s all about operating Strikers. Only a skilled ace who can maneuver behind the enemy can survive! You know that’s how it was during the Fuso Sea Incident as well!”

Tomoko recalled her memories of the Fuso Sea Incident two years ago as she said that. Wasn’t it all thanks to the Ki-27, with its tight turning radius, that the light Neuroi fighter weapon platforms called the Rallos could be shot down as they fluttered about?

The sluggish Rallos looked like enormous flies with propellers, and it had been impossible for them to target the Ki-27s used by Tomoko's squadron, which could whirl through the air like sparrows.

"It may be true that the Fuso Imperial Army Air Service puts a lot of emphasis on dogfighting. They rely on top aces like you. That's one of the reasons why they insisted on this Ki-43 being a superior dogfighter in the design requirements. But, that's a mistake."

Takeko fell silent, deep in her own thoughts. Tomoko tried to console her friend, and said,

"Hey, Takeko, c'mon have some self-confidence. You're not even close to being unskilled. Just wait, once the deployment to Europe starts..."

It had been decided last month that volunteers would be deployed to war-torn Karlsland, which was in ruins after the Neuroi invasion. Tomoko and Takeko were the first to volunteer at Akeno Flight Academy, and rumors were soon flying all over the Army about which of the elite pilots would be deployed. *I wonder if those rumors are true,* Tomoko would often wonder. *I want to head towards Europe as soon as possible, and begin serving there.* That was what she wished with all her heart.

"It's not even worth thinking about, the two of us will definitely be selected for the deployment. We'll show those Europeans the skill of the Fuso Imperial Army Air Service in dogfighting!"

No matter how full of energy Tomoko was, her best friend Takeko remained dour.

Is she really so shocked that she had lost?

Was it so surprising that she had lost even though she was using a new model Striker?

It may be true that the Ki-43 Takeko had been equipped with was a newly adopted model, but... because it's a new model there are sure to be a lot of things in a new model that she isn't accustomed to yet. And I was using the Ki-27, which I know as well as the back of my hand.

Even if the Ki-43 was faster and had a more powerful engine, Tomoko had had the advantage in that battle.

It's nothing to be so down about... Tomoko thought, as she shook her head.

Tomoko and Takeko made their approach to the airfield at Akeno Flight Academy side by side.

As they reduced their speed to below 150 km/h, small wheels folded out from a compartment at the foot of the Strikers.

They straightened out to a standing landing position from the standard horizontal flying position, and the wheels screeched as they made contact with the ground. Clouds of dust flew into the air as the two landed.

The first to make their way to the two were not the landing maintenance crews, nor the high-ranking visitors who had come to watch the test, but the throngs of female students clustered about the field.

The flight this time was also serving as the debut performance of the new unit. The airfield was filled to the brim with visitors chosen by lottery, who had come to watch the new Striker and the dashing mechanized air infantry in action. The majority of these tourists were in fact schoolgirls. They crowded around Tomoko and Takeko, each of them pressing dozens of postcards into their hands.

"Ace Tomoko-sama! It's Ace Tomoko-oneesama! Tomoe-Gozen of the Fuso Sea!"

Tomoko, who had shot down 7 Neuroi craft above the Fuso Sea, was widely known from the extensive coverage of her in the news. Whether she was known as 'Tomoe-Gozen of the Fuso Sea' or Ace Tomoko, she was the idol of schoolgirls across the nation.

Not only that, but Tomoko's was a beautiful young woman like a Fuso doll, and her small and sharp but courageous eyes, coupled with her languid atmosphere, only served to raise her popularity even more.

"Aaaah! Takeko-oneesama is here as well!"

With a face like that of an olden princess, Takeko was just as popular.

With loud cries and shouts, the schoolgirls rushed towards Tomoko and Takeko.

“I made some dango for you!”

“I’ve made ohagi! Please have some!”

“Take this, take this! It’s called ‘Chou a la crème’! It’s a pastry from Gallia!”

Dozens of schoolgirls tried to push to the front to give their own gifts, pressing on Tomoko and Takeko like a stampede.

All the while, cameras flashed with loud snaps, competing with the commotion of the schoolgirls.

Reporters with large cameras had begun to gather around the group as well.

Some reporters began pushing their way through the schoolgirl crowd, pens in hand.

“A word about the European deployment decision, if you please!”

“What?”

Tomoko started.

I’ve been wondering for ages when the decision would come, but it’s been released at last?

“Please tell us earlier if reporters will be coming.”

Akeno Flight Academy, office of the Director of Research.

Tomoko frowned at Chuu-sa Washizumi, who managed the various flight-related experiments at the academy. Chuu-sa Washizumi was a middle-aged man in his mid-forties, with a receding hairline. He was dressed in a khaki uniform, which looked uncomfortably tight for his heavyset frame.

“Well, we only just received word from Operations Planning at Headquarters, that the official deployment decisions had been completed. It seems those reporters rushed here the second they received word from Public Relations at Ichigaya, just before noon. Those fellows are always quick to catch wind of any information.”

“So, the reason those reporters are here...”

“That’s right. Akeno will be deploying mechanized air infantry as well. As a vanguard, both of you will be sent to Europe.”

Tomoko jumped into the air happily.

“Yes!”

“You seem quite happy, Shou-i Anabuki.”

Tomoko straightened out, puffing out her chest.

“Of course, sir! This is the perfect chance to show those Europeans that the miko of the Fuso Empire are the best in the world!”

Shou-i Tomoko pointed upwards, a proud look on her face.

“Ohhhhh, I can’t wait! I really really really really can’t wait~~!”

Tomoko was so happy that it seemed she might end up rolling on the floor any second. Chuu-sa Washizumi looked at her uneasily, then shifted his gaze to Takeko.

Biting her lip softly, Takeko gave a small nod.

Chuu-sa Washizumi cleared his throat loudly, and nodded gravely.

“Then, I will give you your orders officially. Fuso Imperial Army, Akeno Flight Academy Testing Squadron, Shou-i Katoh Takeko. You are hereby ordered to report for duty in Karlsland.”

Takeko saluted, a dignified expression on her face, and accepted the written order assignment.

Chuu-sa Washizumi Chuu-sa then turned to Tomoko.

“Fuso Imperial Army, Akeno Flight Academy Testing Squadron, Shou-i Anabuki Tomoko.”

“Sir!” Tomoko vigorously saluted.

However, what came next from the director’s mouth was completely out of her expectations.

“...You are hereby ordered to report for duty in Suomus.”

“*Suomus?*”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise.

“Northern Europe. A country with many lakes. They seem to be afraid of a possible Neuroi invasion, but simply don’t have enough mechanized air infantry, and so have requested support from super-power nations.”

Suomus...

She had heard of the country before, but could not say exactly where it was. In her mind, it was a completely forgettable place.

Why in the world am I being deployed to some backwater country in the middle of nowhere?

“Afraid? Then, that means they haven’t been invaded yet.”

“I, I suppose. Yes.”

“‘*Yes*’!? Why am I not being sent to the frontlines in Karlsland, where the hardest fighting is going on!?”

Takeko stepped closer to Chuu-sa Washizumi.

“What in hell am I supposed to do in Suomus!”

“Well... You know? The Neuroi may invade them any day... a precautionary force. With so many other countries sending mechanized air infantry, it would

not do for us to completely ignore their request.”

“‘*Precautionary*’! What is this? Are you telling me to go there and play around in a patrol squad? Deployment to Suomus, that’s a job for second-line troops! Takeko’s going to Karlsland, so why am I...”

“Shou-i Anabuki.”

Takeko called her not by name, but by rank.

“It’s an order.”

Kih! Tomoko glared at Takeko.

“Takeko! What are you saying! Didn’t you say that we’d fight the Neuroi together! That you and I would be the ones to chase the Neuroi out of Karlsland!”

Takeko shook her head.

“An order is an order. Accept it.”

Hearing her best friend tell her that in so peremptory a manner, Tomoko was forced to accept the order assignment. However, she would never stand for it. *What is the meaning of this?*

Without another word, Takeko walked out into the corridor alone. Tomoko chased after her.

“Takeko!”

However, Takeko did not turn around.

“What was with your attitude back there? Hey!”

Tomoko reached out and grabbed Takeko’s shoulder, and spun her around.

“You were acting like it was obvious that I would be going to Suomus. What’s going on?”

Arms akimbo, Tomoko glared at Takeko face-to-face.

“That’s right.”

“That’s right, I’m sure it’s got to be some mistake that I’m going to Suomus... but it’s not!”

“I have to pack my belongings.”

As Takeko tried to walk away again, Tomoko stepped in front of her once more.

“Please move.”

“You... you knew, didn’t you?”

“About what?”

“That I had been deployed to Suomus. *That’s* why you weren’t surprised back there. Am I wrong?”

“Yes, I knew.”

“*What did you say?* Then, you must know the reason, right? Why am I being sent to Suomus!?”

Takeko raised her head resolutely, and faced Tomoko.

“Have you read the details on the Neuroi which invaded Karlsland?”

The report compiled by military observers. Tomoko nodded. *What does that have to do with my deployment to Suomus?*

“The ‘Neuroi’ which invaded Europe are nothing like the small things that came to the Fuso Sea. With bombers making up the core of its weapons, this time it is an all-out invasion force... These aren’t things that you can deal with through individual skill alone.”

Tomoko began shaking. In her mind, she thought that Takeko was saying that it

would be dangerous for her with her skills.

“You’re saying I’m not good enough, aren’t you?”

“No, that’s *not* what I meant. I’m saying that it’s dangerous if you don’t change your way of thinking. But, you’re always so stubborn... I realized that you wouldn’t be able to change your tactics so readily. So...”

What is she saying?

Here at Akeno... No, in the entire Imperial Army Air Service, there was no who could match her skill in dogfighting.

Tomoko thought back to the match earlier that day.

“Stop making excuses for yourself. You’re planning on just leaving me with the Suomus deployment, aren’t you? You just can’t get over the fact that my shoot-down count is higher than yours.”

At that moment, a loud sniffle escaped from Takeko.

She was trembling lightly.

“I don’t care about my personal shoot-down count.”

Tomoko started.

“Takeko...”

“Become a real ace, Tomoko. I’ll be waiting.”

Her eyes brimming with tears, Takeko ran off. Tomoko was left alone in the corridor, looking hurt.

Sigh, what is happening?

It’s been my dream to fight together with Takeko, my best friend.

I’ve always wanted to have the chance to compare our shoot-down counts fair and square.

It was always my plan for the two of us to show those Europeans, with their boasts of advanced flight technology, just what the Tomo-Tako combination can do...

I had to have been removed from the Karlsland deployment because of some conspiracy.

Tomoko rubbed a hand across her face. Having the stage for her chance to shine snatched away was so frustrating it was unendurable.

“Why do *I* have to be deployed to Suomus!”

One week later...

The *Awamaru*, which would be transporting the soldiers of the Fuso Empire European Expeditionary Fleet, was preparing to set sail.

There were crowds of people in the street to send the troops off, waving paper flags and cheering.

A joint Army and Navy band struck up a rousing march. The officers and troops lined up behind the railings of the ship saluted as one, and shouts of joy rang out from the assembled well-wishers.

“Go get those Neuroi!”

“Fuso Empire, banzai!”

The officers and troops lined up on the side of the ship saluted as one.

Those cheers reached their climax as the witches of the mechanized air infantry appeared. As the focus of the European detachment, these infantrywomen were assembled in orderly ranks of Army and Navy troops. They saluted.

“Kiyaaaaaaaah! They’re so magnificent!”

“Wonderful!”

The mechanized air infantry were heaped in the jubilant praise of the crowd, cheered as loudly as if they were stars of a musical troupe.

Not everyone has the ability to use magic. In fact, because it depends on specific genetic factors, it could be said that not very many people at all can use it. Furthermore, the vast majority of those users are female, and it is an ability that disappears with the passing of adolescence. Because of that, young girls who can use magic are seen as ephemeral seasonal flowers, admired by young boys as idols beyond their reach, and thought of by young girls as the ideal paragon of

what they want to be.

Numerous reporters were there to cover the event, the flashes from their cameras lighting up the area. However, standing a bit away from the festival-like commotion, on the opposite side of the ship, a girl stood sighing.

“Sigh... The main stars sure are lucky...”

It was Anabuki Tomoko.

While the crowds cheered, the troops lined up in orderly ranks along the ship. They were the infantrywomen being deployed to Karlsland. Tomoko unfolded the newspaper in her hands. The words ‘Fuso Imperial Army and Navy to send troops to gasping Karlsland after Neuroi invasion’ were plastered in huge letters at the top of the front page, and much of the rest of the page was made up of long lists of the names of the infantrywomen who were being deployed. Finally, in small letters below that... a few lines were left to write ‘At the same time, a flight will be deployed to Suomus in Northern Europe’. Of course, the reporters had not bothered to write any names there, including Tomoko’s.

“I guess that means I’m just part of an insignificant ‘flight’...”

She mumbled to herself in a self-deprecating manner.

As she brooded alone... Suddenly, a hysteric cry startled her from behind.

“Uwaah!”

Turning around, she saw a short girl standing there, who seemed to be staring at Tomoko dizzily.

The girl stepped closer, and looked closely at Tomoko’s face. After taking a long hard look...

“You really are Shou-i Anabuki Tomoko! I’m so moved, ma’am!”

The girl was a full head shorter than Tomoko. She was wearing a white sailor uniform under a water-proof coat. On her head was a hat with an anchor mark on it.

“...You’re a sailor, I suppose.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! I’m Ittou Hikou Heisou Sakomizu Haruka, of the Fuso Imperial Navy Yokohama Flotilla!”

“Oh?”

Tomoko studied Haruka from top to bottom. A cute face. Maybe twelve, thirteen years old. She had neatly cut hair, and under her bangs, her big and round black eyes were sparkling. Suddenly, the girl brought a hand up to her mouth, flustered, and saluted once more.

“Ah, excuse me! Ittou Hikou Heisou Sakomizu Haruka, reporting!”

Tomoko smiled at Haruka, as she gave her name in formal Army style.

“It’s fine. We’re on a ship after all... Let’s just do it how the Navy does it. Well, you said that you’re a Flight Sergeant, so that means you’re in the mechanized air infantry as well?”

“Eh? Yes, ma’am! That is correct!”

Haruka was still staring at Tomoko, her eyes sparkling.

“What’s wrong? Is there something on my face?”

“Eh? No! Excuse me, ma’am! No, I mean, no excuse, ma’am! Um, actually, I am a huge fan of you, Shou-i!”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Yes, ma’am! You were fabulous during the Fuso Sea Incident! Even when alone and surrounded by five Neuroi craft, you fought your way through!”

Haruka began getting more and more excited, words blurting from her mouth.

“It even became a movie! ‘Flash in the Fuso Sea’! I went to watch that movie! Shou-i Anabuki, you were cast as yourself as well, I know!”

Tomoko recalled that time. The movie had gotten full cooperation from both the Army and the Navy. Even Tomoko had to go all the way to the Tsuburaya

Special Effects Studio in Setagaya-Kinuta, in Tokyo, to take up her role as herself. The movie had been a huge hit, raising mechanized air infantry into stars to the people in one bound.

“After watching that movie, I wanted to join the mechanized air infantry! That’s what I wished! Even if it would be hard, there are several witches in our family history, so I put all my effort into training... I actually wanted to join the Imperial Army Air Service, but... everyone in my family has been in the Navy...”

Haruka was explaining her entire history unasked. Since it seemed like it was not going to end any time soon, Tomoko began edging away.

“Really. Well, keep at it.”

However, Haruka started following right after her.

“Um, um! Shou-i, are you being deployed to Karlsland?”

“Eh?”

Tomoko’s face twitched.

That was still a sore subject.

“I’m sure the Neuroi will be kicked right out of Karlsland in one blow, with the aces of the Army Air Service heading there. Some of the elite pilots from the Yokohama Flotilla were selected to head there as well, it seems.

“‘*It seems*’...? How about you?”

“...Ma’am. Well, actually... I’ve been a hopeless member of the Yokohama Flotilla ever since I joined. Marskmanship, dogfighting, navigation... if you start from the bottom, well, you could say I’m number one in all of those.”

“Eh?”

“That’s why I was removed from the deployment to Karlsland, where heavy fighting is expected, and instead assigned to a country called Suomus in Northern Europe.”

“You’re being deployed to Suomus?”

“Yes, that’s right, ma’am. But, I’m relieved~~ If I were sent to some chaotic battlefield, I’m sure I’d get hurt really badly. No, not just hurt, I might even die. Well, unlike me, I’m sure you’re deploying to Karlsland, Shou-i. I would be extremely pleased if you would do your best over there in my stead as well.”

Haruka clenched both her fists in front of her chest as she said that. Tomoko felt miserable at those words, even though there was no malice behind them.

A worried expression appeared on Haruka’s face as she noticed Tomoko’s cold gaze on her.

“Um, I... Did I say too much? I, I’m sorry! I’m not sure why, but I’m sorry! If there’s anything I can do to apologize...”

She had no malice in her words. Tomoko shook her head, as she decided to overlook it.

“I’m going to Suomus as well, you know.”

“Eeeeeeeeeh? An ace like you, Shou-i?”

Haruka’s expression said that she was shocked to the core. Tomoko smiled stiffly.

“Let’s do our best together.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am! It’s an honor, ma’am! Then, excuse me, ma’am!”

Haruka saluted, a huge smile plastered on her face. She spun around in a sharp about-face, and began to run off with a soft pitter-patter of her feet.

“Ah-ouch!”

However, just seconds later she slammed her head into a pipe extending from the wall, and crumpled to the ground.

Her eyes were spinning. She couldn’t just be left alone, but it wasn’t so bad that she needed to be taken to the medical center. With no other choice, Tomoko

picked Haruka up in her arms, and brought the girl to her own room.

Because Tomoko was an officer, she had a personal room assigned to her. It was an extremely cramped room though. With an area of about 2 jyou (35 square feet, or 3.2 square meters), there was a single fold-down tatami bed attached to the wall. Under a circular window, there was a glass on a table, which was really just a shelf.

Tomoko put down the bed, and put Haruka there to rest.

The view of the harbor could be seen from the small window. In another hour, they would be out in the Pacific Ocean. The beginning of the long voyage to Europe.

Tomoko bit her lip softly as she watched her homeland begin to vanish into the distance.

Then... Haruka, who was sprawled across the bed, groaned and opened her eyes.

“Are you alright?”

“Y-Yes... I’m alright, ma’am.”

As Haruka said that, she rubbed the spot where she had bumped her head.

“Isn’t it a bit unbelievable for someone in the Navy to hit her head on a pipe on a ship, and collapse?”

Tomoko glanced at Haruka, who was blushing and looking embarrassed, and she fell deeper into her misery.

If they were sending girls as absent-minded as this...

In other words, it was the Navy's plan to send the girls they didn’t care about at all to Suomus.

For her to be treated the same as a misfit from the Navy...

As she brooded in those thoughts...

Something flashed in Tomoko’s mind.

Of course! That's right!

There's no doubt this is some conspiracy.

There must some group jealous of my success so far.

Otherwise, there's no way I would have been sent to Suomus.

Tomoko made up her mind.

No matter what... I'll make my mark in Suomus.

I'll accomplish something so important, nobody will be able to get in a word sideways. Then... that's when I'll have the last laugh against those that decided to send me to Suomus.

"Just you watch! I am Anabuki Tomoko. The ace feared far and wide as Tomoe-Gozen of the Fuso Sea!"

Tomoko muttered to herself firmly, as she looked out the small window.

Chapter 2 - Suomus, Northern Europe

Suomus was a small country in Northern Europe with a population of 4 million.

In terms of territory, it was a bit smaller than the Fuso Empire.

This huge territory, with its relatively small population, was mostly made up of forests containing pines and other conifers. It was also particularly famous for its many lakes. Those lakes would freeze over during the winter season, and would be used as temporary landing fields. That was the reason why Kauhava Air Force Base, which had invited volunteer troops from several countries, had been built beside several beautiful lakes.

After five long months at sea, the *Awamaru* had docked at the military harbor in Brest, Gallia. Tomoko and Haruka had then boarded a transport plane, and had arrived at Kauhava Air Force Base at last.

As soon as they stepped off of the Karlsländer transport plane, they were shivering from the biting cold.

“Brrrrr, brrrr.”

Haruka hugged herself tightly, as she shuffled her feet. The two of them were draped in heavy military issue coats, but the coats did little to help.

It was November 10, well into autumn. However, Kauhava Air Force Base was already completely enveloped in a wintry façade, a world of snow as far as the eye could see.

Tomoko sighed, a frosty cloud forming, as she looked over the place which would be her battlefield.

“A country of snow, huh...”

“Shou-i, it’s cold, but the snow is pretty, isn’t it?”

Haruka, her cheeks as red as apples, murmured happily, even as she shivered. Tomoko scooped up a bit of the snow near her feet, and studied it.

“I wonder if the magic engine of the Ki-27 can handle this.”

“Wow... I was really impressed by the southern seas when I first saw them after joining the Navy, but this country is just as amazing... I’m happy I came.”

Haruka looked at Tomoko, a wide smile on her face. She was hoping that the person she idolized would be sharing her thoughts, but...

“Who knows if the engine will work at the stated performance in this extreme cold.”

Haruka sighed softly. It seemed as if Tomoko did not feel anything at all, even with such a beautiful snowy landscape in front of her.

A snowmobile painted in white camouflage colors pushed its way through the snow to where the two were standing. The door opened, and an intelligent looking woman wearing glasses stepped out of the vehicle.

She turned to face Tomoko, and saluted.

“Welcome to Kauhava Air Force Base. I am Flight Lieutenant Häkkinen, part of the command staff at the base.”

As soon as Haruka heard ‘Flight Lieutenant’, she immediately stood to attention and saluted.

“Fu-Fu-Fu-Fuso Imperial Navy, Flight Sergeant Sakomizu Haruka!”

Next, Tomoko saluted as well, with feigned politeness. Although Häkkinen had a higher rank, there was a touch of arrogance in Tomoko’s actions.

“Fuso Imperial Army, Pilot Officer Anabuki Tomoko.”

F/L Häkkinen’s eyebrow raised slightly at the name.

“We welcome the arrival of an ace like yourself.”

“Thank you.”

Tomoko expressed her gratitude, a touch of hostility etched into her words.

The snowmobile rumbled off, and brought Tomoko on a shaky journey to the briefing room.

It was a dilapidated building, what looked like a former warehouse. Inside were two kerosene stoves, and a number of chairs surrounding them.

There was a large blackboard at the front, and desks which looked like ones that might be found at school. On the blackboard, a message was written in both Suomish and Britannian, which said ‘Suomus Independent Volunteer Air Squadron Command Center’. Tomoko, having received officer training, and Haruka, being a Navy pilot, were both able to read those words easily. It seemed as if the language that would be used would be Britannian.

“Our squadron commander is late, isn’t she.”

Haruka mumbled to herself in her seat. Her raccoon-dog familiar was sitting near by. Next to her, Tomoko was looking bored with her elbows on the desk, a frown set on her face.

The squadron commander of the squadron in the Suomus Air Force that Tomoko and Haruka were assigned to was supposed to be coming any second.

“Don’t you wonder what kind of person our commander is going to be? I hope she isn’t scary.”

However, Tomoko did not reply. She seemed to be somewhat irritated.

Three more young girls were sitting together with them. All of them were Westerners.

Each of them had a different kind of familiar with them, and they were all waiting for the squadron commander in their own way.

Haruka had placed herself as close to the firewood stove as possible. To her right, a young blonde girl was reading a book silently. She was dressed in a Karlsländer Air Force uniform, and a badger was sitting in her lap. Probably her familiar.

She was slightly younger than Haruka. What could she be reading?

Haruka craned her neck around to try and read as well, her interest piqued. However, she gave up when saw that it was written in Karlslaendisch.

“What are you reading?” She tried to ask, but received no answer. The girl had all of her attention on the book, the bright blue eyes behind her glasses never straying from the pages. Haruka’s curiosity increased, and as soon as she tried to repeat her question louder, the badger in the girl’s lap glared at her. Its eyes were telling her not to disturb its master.

Next to the girl with glasses, another girl with splendid golden hair was sitting. She had golden hair just like the young Karlsländer girl, but this girl’s hair reached nearly down to her waist. She was holding a bottle with some black liquid in it. She had been happily taking large gulps from that bottle for a while.

Though she was still a young girl, she had a rather voluminous body. She was wearing a sharp Liberian Navy dress uniform, but her chest looked particularly snug. On her head, there was an animal that Haruka had never seen before. It was covered in brown fur, except for its face which was white. Its tail was striped in black and brown fur.

With astonishment written over her face, Haruka look at what was most likely the Liberian girl’s familiar. As the girl noticed Haruka’s gaze, she beamed a brilliant smile like a Hollywood star. She leaned forward as Haruka returned her smile hesitantly.

“Hey y’all, where’re you from?”

She spoke in Britannian but with a strange accent.

“The Fuso Empire,” Haruka answered. The girl looked puzzled, still smiling widely.

"From where? Where is it?"

“The Far East, I guess you would say?”

“Oh! Next to Florida, right?”

“No.”

The girl laughed out a ‘Sorry!’, and offered the bottle she was holding to Haruka.

“Want to drink some cola?”

“Eh, no thanks,” Haruka said, as she turned down the Liberian’s offer.

Next to her was a girl with silver hair, wearing a black motorcycle jacket. A dog with a long body and short fur was sprawled by her feet. Haruka wondered if that strange looking dog was the girl’s familiar. The girl was pretty, but she looked troubled by something, her forehead covered in wrinkles. The girl left an impression that she was hard to get close to. She had been smoking cigarettes non-stop. The girl turned to face Haruka as she noticed her incessant staring.

Haruka dipped her head in greeting, but the girl went back to staring into the distance soon. Her attitude seemed to being saying that she had no interest in Haruka whatsoever.

“There are all sorts of people here, right?”

Haruka turned to face Tomoko again, but she had her gaze fixed to the front, while she grumbled to herself, deep in her own thoughts.

“Is something wrong?”

Tomoko chewed on her lip at the question. Haruka started in surprise at her behavior. She had never expected Tomoko, who was even known as Tomoe-Gozen of the Fuso Sea, to act in such a childish manner.

A blush crept up on Haruka’s cheeks, when suddenly Tomoko swung around to face her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Eh? No, um, nothing! Yes!”

She shook her head from side to side. She couldn’t tell the person she idolized that her chest was throbbing because of her. To have her chest throbbing because

of another woman... Haruka silently told herself off for being weird. It was a matter that she most definitely wanted to avoid.

“Oh,” Tomoko replied, and she promptly fell back into her own thoughts, her muttering starting up once again. Haruka looked up at Tomoko, a bit worried.

In any case, it was late. When would she get here? F/L Häkkinen had told them all just five minutes ago to wait for a little bit, while she brought the squadron commander over, but more than twenty minutes had already passed. It would have been an unbelievable situation in the Fuso Imperial Navy, where everything had to be done five minutes before.

Even though they had been made to wait in such a manner, nobody seemed to have noticed. Haruka thought to herself that she must have come to a place with some amazing people indeed.

I wonder if something happened? As Haruka began to worry... Bam! The door suddenly banged open.

A pretty young girl with golden hair so light it was nearly white came in, balancing a stack of paper. Somehow she had managed to open the door while carrying that bundle.

“Awah, awawawawawawa!”

She overbalanced, and tripped splendidly, the stack of paper she had been holding flying all over the briefing room.

“Hiaaaaaah!” She shouted miserably.

F/L Häkkinen entered the room right after the girl.

“What are you doing?”

She asked, as she stared down at the light haired girl on the floor.

“Both of my hands were full... I thought I’d open the door a bit more, but I lost my balance, and...”

She stood up uneasily, and started to hurriedly pick up the scattered sheets of

paper.

“Just leave the documents for now, please introduce yourself first.” The girl nodded in response to F/L Häkkinen.

She shuffled about on her feet for a bit, before suddenly standing bolt upright. She then scribbled something on the palm of her hand, and brought it to her mouth quickly. The girl seemed to be extremely nervous.

She took a deep breath, and stepped in front of the blackboard.

“Welcome to Suomus. Allow me to express our gratitude to you, volunteer soldiers from countries around the world, for coming from so far away to our aid. Eh, ummm, I am Flying Officer Elma Leivonen, and starting from today, I will be fighting together with you. And, so... what do I say now?”

Embarrassed, her gaze dropped to the floor as she trailed off, and she took surreptitious glances at F/L Häkkinen, who waved her away, as if telling her to get on with her introduction.

“That is... well, I’m still wracked by uncertainties about all this, but, well, I suppose I’m the squadron commander? The squadron commander of this Independent Volunteer Air Squadron, ah, which is the name of the squadron that all of you are assigned to. I wish we could have gotten a cuter name, though. Maybe the Penguin Squadron or something. Tehe.”

“Ahaahaa! Penguins can’t fly, I know!”

“T-That’s right!”

F/O Elma brought her hand up to her mouth quickly, as if to say “Oh no!” She had probably not been joking, and had meant that seriously. Her shoulders slumped.

“What am I saying... on the proud day our Independent Squadron is being established too... sniff...”

Haruka watched as the poor squadron commander stood in front of them. She looked like the type who always had trouble and disappointment surrounding her. Haruka felt like the two of them were similar in a way.

F/O Elma suddenly forced herself to smile, as she tried to cheer herself up.

“And there we have it, I’ll be your, well, squadron commander, and um, err... let’s all do our very best to get along!”

She clenched two fists in front of her chest, bending forward at her waist.

Silence.

Nobody clapped, or responded in any way. Tomoko and the silver-haired girl stared at F/O Elma with cold eyes. The tiny Karlsländer girl with glasses had been reading her book the entire time, and the Liberian with the huge chest was humming and doing her nails.

F/O’s forced good cheer went to pieces in seconds, and she turned to F/L Häkkinen with tears in her eyes.

“Flight Lieutenant Häkkinen, I told you I can’t do it~~ Why did they ever choose me to be the squadron commander~~?”

F/L Häkkinen lifted her glasses, and answered coldly in a firm voice.

“There are no other witches available.”

“How could that be~~”

F/O Elma mumbled miserably, and her shoulders slumped. She was shaking lightly. Haruka began to worry that she was crying, but she was not.

“Optimism, optimism. Positive thinking, positive thinking.”

She mumbled that phrase over and over like a charm, and suddenly raised her face.

“Well then, introductions! Let’s try that!”

She seemed to have a very innocent personality.

“Then, let’s start from the left!”

The silver-haired girl stood up without a word, her footsteps echoing across the

room.

“Britannian Air Force, Elizabeth Beurling. My rank is Pilot Officer.”

She spoke sourly, and sat down immediately after she finished. In a troubled voice, F/O Elma tried to draw the girl out more.

“Umm, and...?”

“And what?”

“You know, we’re all going to be good friends, so we need to know more about you... Err... like the food you like. Or if you’re dating anyone, or bad habits or special skills.”

F/O Elma began listing out all sorts of questions.

“Your Striker model?”

F/L Häkkinen prompted Beurling.

“The Hurricane.” Buerling answered simply.

“An excellent Striker.” F/L Häkkinen murmured in reply.

“Umm, well then, the next person, please!”

The girl with the huge chest beamed a wide smile, and stood up.

“I’m Katharine O’Hare, from the Liberian Navy! Nice meeting y’all!”

She began waving both hands merrily.

“My special skill is this!”

As she said that, Katharine drew a revolver from its holster at her waist. Holding it near her waist, she fanned the hammer with her left hand, firing round after round.

Everyone in the room dove to the floor.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!'

The loud report of the gunshots echoed out across the room.

“Oh! Don’t be frightened! Those are blanks! I use 'em for greetings!”

Katharine spun her revolver around her finger like in a Western, and put the gun back in her holster.

“There are large holes in the blackboard, however.” F/L Häkkinen answered as coolly as ever, as she fingered the bullet holes in the blackboard.

“Sorry! I must have made a mistake!”

Katharine answered in a sweet voice, and laughed happily.

“Er, errrr... Next!”

Somewhat desperately, F/O Elma pointed to the Karlsländer girl sitting in the chair in the center, who looked like the youngest person in the group.

The girl firmly closed the book she had been reading, and placed it carefully into the bag at the side of her chair. Then, she took out a worn notebook from the bag.

Everyone there was watching her, wondering what the notebook was for. The girl raised the notebook up to eye level slowly.

“I am Flight Sergeant Ursula Hartmann, form the Karlsländer Air Force. The motto of all Karlsländer soldiers is ‘learn everything from your textbooks’. Therefore, I always act according to the guidelines set out in the ‘Karlsländer Air Force Curriculum’ I have here.”

F/O Elma opened her mouth uncertainly into a wide 'O' as she watched the young girl.

“The Karlsländer Air Force Curriculum?”

“Yes.”

“But we’re in Suomus...”

Ursula answered, standing stock still.

“I am a soldier of the Karlsländer Air Force. That will not change, no matter if we are at the South Pole, or at the end of the sky. Therefore, Madam Commander, I would be pleased to allow you to peruse this.”

The girl handed the notebook to F/O Elma.

F/O Elma flipped through the pages quickly, but as it was all written in Karlslaendisch, she could never hope to read it. She sighed, and placed the book on top of the desk nearby.

She looked at the printouts scattered across the floor sadly. It was the Suomus Air Force curriculum, translated into Britannian, but she suspected the girl would never read it.

“Erm, then the next person, please.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” Haruka stood up nervously.

“Fuso Imperial Navy, Flight Sergeant Sakomizu Haruka! My hobbies are, um, well, I’m not very good at it, but I like to make snacks. Dango... I suppose you don’t know what that is. It’s a snack from the Fuso Empire, which is made up of rice flour and shaped into round balls like this. They are a bit chewy, and very good, so I think I can make some for all of you soon. Um, and then, I also do archery.”

After having said so much... she finally noticed that F/O Elma was crying, tears streaming down her face.

“Did, did I say something wrong?”

“Of course not, I’m just so moved. There’s actually someone normal here...”

Haruka realized for the first time just how unbelievable the place she had come was.

On the other hand, Tomoko was...

Shaking in rage.

What is this place?

They’re just a bunch of worthless fools. I’ll never be able to catch up to the troops in Karlsland, not while I’m with this lot.

What can I do?

This has to change

I will change this.

These thoughts drifted across Tomoko’s mind.

First of all, she would have to train this group up, so that they could at least be of some use. *I can’t have them getting in my way during a real battle*, Tomoko thought to herself.

“Well then, would our last person...” As F/O Elma trailed off, Tomoko stood up

briskly, her determination showing in her actions. She had to take the initiative right away.

“Fuso Imperial Army, Anabuki Tomoko. My specialty is dogfighting.”

Even though we all came here to go to war, not a single one of them mentioned any combat proficiencies. That just annoys me to no end. We’re not here to play around!

F/O Elma began clapping enthusiastically.

“Oh yes, Flight Lieutenant Anabuki here is an ace who shot down seven enemy craft over the Fuso Sea! It’s reassuring to have you here! I hope you can teach us from your experience!”

Tomoko replied to F/O Elma, who was beaming brightly.

“Then could I interpret that as you allowing me to be in charge of our training?”

F/O Elma started in surprise at Tomoko’s seriousness. She turned to look at F/L Häkkinen worriedly.

“I don’t see why not. It seems she’s the only one with real combat experience after all.”

“Then, we’ll leave it to you.”

F/O Elma beamed at Tomoko once again.

“Well then, with the introductions over, it isn’t much, but we’ve prepared a small welcoming reception for all of you.”

“Wow! When you say welcoming, I hope that means food and drink!”

Katharine jumped up happily.

“We have it all arranged! Then, if you’ll all follow me this way...” F/O Elma said as she started to guide the group, when Tomoko stepped in front of her.

“Yes?”

“Let’s leave the welcoming reception for later.”

“Eh?”

“Do you think this is any time to be having a banquet, when we have no idea when the Neuroi might attack?”

F/O Elma stepped back quickly with a startled squeal under Tomoko’s glare. *She’s scary.*

“B-But... you’ve come all this way, so...”

“We came here to go to war. We came here to fight back against the Neuroi. And I came here to show the world what I can do.”

“But...” As F/O Elma shuffled about uncertainly, Tomoko glared at her again.

“You did say that you would leave training to me, didn’t you?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

F/O Elma answered immediately, in a way that made it hard to tell just who the superior officer was.

“Then I’ll do as I see fit. Squadron, equip your Strikers and assemble at the airfield.”

Chapter 3 - Training in the Azure Sky

Dark gray clouds covered the surroundings outside.

It was 5 degrees below freezing. It felt far colder than that.

The squadron lined up in that cold, shivering. Each of them had the Striker they had brought from their home country equipped. Next to them, maintenance crews were on stand-by, warming up the engines.

"Brrrrrr, but wow, it's cold! Hey, Tomoko, maybe we can do this later?"

Katharine shivered as she spoke. On her legs, there was a Striker even larger than the F4F Wildcat she had before... 'Beerster Buffalo' was written on the side. With a volume as large as a keg of beer, it was fitting for the buxom Katharine.

Tomoko took one glance at that Striker, and muttered.

"What *is* that?"

"It's a Buffalo!"

"No, I'm not asking for the name. That looks like a clumsy Striker."

"Really? But, when I came here to Suomus, they told me that this is all they had, so I had to put up with it."

Katharine replied in her happy-go-lucky voice.

This is all they had? In other words, outdated equipment.

"Do you think you'll be able to dogfight in a Striker as awkward-looking as that? What were the engineers in Liberion thinking?"

"I don't know about that, but this feels really tough! I like it!"

Sighing at Katharine's carefree words, Tomoko turned to F/O Elma, the squadron commander. Elma started in surprise when she noticed Tomoko's gaze on her, and stood as straight as if she were in a parade being inspected by a general. She

looked upwards into the sky, trembling lightly and biting her lip. She looked extremely nervous, even though she was only being looked at by her subordinate.

"Commander."

"Y-Yes, ma'am!"

"What Striker is that?"

Tomoko asked, pointing at the Striker painted in white camouflage colors.

"Yes, ma'am! Umm, yes, a Romagnan G.50!"

"Oh?" Tomoko murmured as she looked over the Striker. It did not look like a very maneuverable unit. In Romagna, it was most likely a surplus model, or a leftover unit from an equipment overhaul. But for the Suomus Air Force, desperate for any equipment they could get, this might be the best they could do.

Next, Tomoko turned her gaze to the smallest member of the squadron, Ursula. She had a strange Striker, one Tomoko had never seen before. Tomoko had been expecting a Messerscharf, since Ursula was from Karlsland, but... even after taking a closer look, the Striker looked nothing like the Messerscharfs Tomoko had tested when the Imperial Army had imported some models the year before.

"What is that?"

"A Heinzel He 112."

A Striker Tomoko had never even heard of. Unlike the sharp and agile-looking Messerscharfs, it looked rather crude and blocky.

"A new model?"

"No. A model that lost to the Messerscharf Me 109 during the adoption tests."

"An unsuccessful model? What are you doing with such an old Striker? Why not one of the Messerscharfs your country is so proud of?"

"There were not enough."

Ursula replied haltingly. Of course, the Messerscharf was the mainstay of the Karlsländer Air Force, and intense fighting was taking place against the Neuroi all along the borders of Karlsland. All of the invaluable Messerscharfs had likely to be sent to that front.

Next, Tomoko glanced at the Striker on P/O Beurling, the silver-haired Britannian girl. The brown-painted Striker had a bulls-eye roundel marking its designation under a fur-lined insulating leather cover.

No matter how Tomoko looked at it, it was obviously an old-fashioned model.

It wasn't one of the Spitfires she had seen in some air infantry idol magazines. *That's...*

"A Hurricane?"

Beurling nodded in reply to Tomoko's question.

"That's a second-rate Striker, then."

"And what about it?"

Beurling glared at Tomoko with cold eyes. Then, she placed a cigarette into her mouth, and lit it.

"We're in training."

Ignoring Tomoko's warning, Beurling puffed on her cigarette nonchalantly. As the tension between the two quickly ramped up, F/O Elma backed away as quickly as she could without drawing attention to herself.

Shing!

Tomoko's sword flashed in an arc from its sheath.

Everyone shouted out in surprise and closed their eyes tight.

Tomoko's sword went back into its sheath with a soft clink. The entire stroke took place in a split second. The cigarette Beurling had been smoking had been cut almost directly in the center, and the front half slowly flitted down onto the

snow.

However, Beurling had not flinched at all.

In utter calm, Beurling flipped the remaining half of the cigarette around, and lit it up again.

"This side's more even. Thanks."

Beurling seemed to have some guts. Tomoko eyes blazed in anger, but she forced herself to look away.

In a small voice, she muttered to herself, spitting out each word.

Every last one of them has a second-rate Striker!

I might be using the old Ki-27 as well, but... I've got a reason. I'm familiar with it, and I have a lot of faith in it. But them, they just had abandoned Strikers forced on them!

I knew from the beginning that nearly every country thinks Suomus is a low priority battlefield not worth focusing on... it just gets worse when each country sees other countries treating it the same way, and this is how it ends up.

Tomoko sighed deeply, and turned to Haruka next.

Haruka's Striker was put on a bit differently.

The other Witches had their Strikers equipped on their legs, but in addition to that, Haruka's Striker had an extra extension like a saddle on a horse. It was not the Type-96 Carrier Fighter Tomoko had seen before during joint training sessions with the Imperial Navy. It was a sharp Striker, painted a light gray.

"Now that's a Striker I've never seen before."

Haruka's cheeks reddened under Tomoko's gaze.

"Y-Yes, ma'am! It is an Experimental Type-12 Carrier Fighter! Almost all Navy air infantry have been re-issued with this model. Recently, some land-based fighter squadrons have also adopted this, and..."

"Hmm?" Tomoko murmured inquisitively as she looked over the Navy's new model. The engine seemed to be the same as the one in the Ki-43 from the mock battle before. However, taking into account the difficulty in meeting the requirements for carrier-based launches, the Ki-43 might perform a bit better.

"Recently? Then you're not familiar with the unit yet?"

"Yes, ma'am... I'm not familiar with it yet. I'm sorry. Excuse me."

Haruka bit her lip apologetically. Then, Tomoko noticed the heavy-looking autocannon Haruka was holding.

"You've got a big gun there."

"It is a 20 mm autocannon, ma'am."

Twenty millimeter? Everyone's eyes widened in surprise upon hearing those words. Not without reason either, since almost all of the machine guns they were equipped with were 7.7 mm or 12.7 mm caliber. 20 mm was an extremely large caliber.

"That looks powerful, but... can you use it?"

With Haruka's slight build, could she even aim that enormous cannon? From the looks of it, it looked to be too much for her.

"Not, not very well, ma'am."

Haruka answered softly.

"If you can't hit anything with it, than any size caliber is a waste."

"You're right, ma'am. Uuu..."

Haruka gaze dropped in shame.

Tomoko doubted that Haruka could bring out the performance of that new model Striker she had. It did not matter if she had a new model or an old model. In other words, Haruka would also be of no help in a battle.

In any case, the inspection was over.

It was finally time to begin the training.

Tomoko thrust her sword into the ground point downwards, and straightened.

"The main element of an air battle is the dogfight. Come up behind the enemy in a tight turn, and take them down with a single close-range attack."

There were no replies.

Everyone was staring at Tomoko blankly. *Doesn't this bunch have any motivation at all?*

Annoyed, Tomoko continued.

"Then, we'll start the training session. Follow after me."

Her Ma-1b magic engine roared, and Tomoko began moving along the runway, knees slightly bent. Just as she reached take-off speed, she jumped and straightened out into a flying position, arching upwards into the sky. The Striker released magic energy at maximum power, sending Tomoko into a rapid ascent.

The Ki-27's magic engine was not exactly powerful, but the Ki-27 was light. Although it was an old model, it climbed quickly.

Looking below her, Tomoko saw the other witches begin to take off one after the other.

Following right behind herself was Haruka's Experimental Type-12 Carrier Fighter.

As might be expected from such a new unit, it's climb rate was top class.

F/S Ursula's He 112 was next. Its appearance made it look sluggish, but it seemed it was actually quite a fast unit.

Following behind the He 112 was F/O Elma's G.50. Beurling's Hurricane came right after that. Coming up dead last was Katharine's heavy-looking Buffalo.

Tomoko continued her ascent, piercing through Suomus's frigid sky.

Thanks to the magic field projected all around her body, it was not as cold as

might be expected.

Several minutes later, Tomoko leveled off once they had reached an altitude of 3000 meters.

Tomoko toggled the switch on her radio next to her throat, flipping it to ON.

"Ah, this is... Commander, what shall we use for our callsigns?"

Elma's voice, garbled slightly by static, came in through the receiver on her ears.

"Um, that's right... What should we do. Well then, um... erm, use our country names."

"Country names, roger. This is Fuso-1, Pilot Officer Anabuki. Over."

"This is Fuso-2, Flight Sergeant Sakomizu Haruka."

"Karlsland-1, Flight Sergeant Ursula Hartmann."

"Um, this is Suomus-1, Flying Officer Elma Leivonen."

"...Britannia-1, Pilot Officer Elizabeth Beurling."

"Liberion-1, Katharine O'Hare, mh-hmm."

Tomoko continued with her orders.

"Form on me."

"Roger."

The squadron replied immediately.

In order of climb rate, the witches lined up in formation.

They cruised for a short time, then Tomoko tapped her throat microphone twice. The internationally recognized signal for "transmission".

"We'll split up now. For now, I'd like to find out your level of ability, so all of you, come after me all at once."

"Excuse me?"

F/O Elma's asked quizzically

"All of us at once, hmm? Tomoko, you want to fight us 1-on-5?"

Katharine.

"That's exactly right. Now come at me already."

Tomoko replied, and unsheathed her sword smoothly. The Bizen Osafune glittered in the setting rays of Suomus's sun, glowing with an eerie light. However, that was not what she would be using this time. Tomoko switched the sword to her left hand, and instead held up the sheath.

"If I hit you anywhere on your body with this sheath, that's a kill. On the other hand, you can hit me with a machine gun, knife, fists, or anything. If you can put me out of commission, or touch me on the back, that'll count as shooting me down."

"Oh no, Pilot Officer Tomoko, what would we do if you get injured?" Elma protested worriedly.

"I'll be fine. There's no way I'll get injured. You should worry about yourselves instead. Don't crash into each other over there."

Tomoko replied as if she were telling a child going a field trip to be careful. The five squadron members grew sullen and offended, though to different levels.

"Then, let's get this started."

The witches rushed straight towards Tomoko simultaneously.

"I'm going in!" Haruka shouted out, the first to charge in her Type-12 Carrier Fighter.

She was coming in a perfectly straight line. Her back would be wide open.

Tomoko sighed as she faced Haruka's charge.

"Take this!"

Haruka had her eyes closed. There was no chance she would ever hit Tomoko like that.

Tomoko evaded the charge easily, and rapped Haruka's head hard with the sheath she was holding.

"Ow!"

"Okay, you're down."

Ursula was the next one to come.

Tomoko was surprised by the speed of the He 112. Ursula was rushing at a respectable speed.

Tomoko flew off at a speed Ursula could catch up to. Tomoko was in no hurry. It was still a 1-on-4 battle, but there was only a single person in a position to attack.

Tomoko began a wide turn.

Slowly... her path drew a gentle arc through the sky, as if she were inviting Ursula in.

Ursula came up on Tomoko's tail perfectly, and a staccato roar echoed out as Ursula fired the 12.7 mm machine gun in her hands. Mechanized air infantry witches had a unique magic field surrounding their bodies while they were flying. Because of that, they could normally shake off several hits as if it were nothing, but... it was still nerve-wracking to really be shot at.

"Well, I did say you could shoot at me, but you know... don't **really** shoot me."

Perhaps she had been too serious. Because Tomoko had said they could shoot her, Ursula was doing just that.

However, Ursula still did not understand the principles of deflection shooting.

Tomoko was flying in an arc at high speed. Ursula would have to predict Tomoko's position in advance and shoot there if she hoped to hit her. The 12.7 mm rounds from Ursula's machine gun chased after Tomoko, but because of

Tomoko's precise evasive maneuvers, all of the rounds missed by a hair's breadth.

But even so, Ursula simply adjusted her aim and continued firing. Little by little, like a shower of ice candy, the palely-glowing stream of bullets neared Tomoko.....

However, a perfectly textbook maneuver like that would never work in a real battle. Tomoko tightened her turn gradually. The He 112 was quick, but its turning abilities were not as polished. As Ursula tightened her own turn radius, she slowly began to lose speed... and suddenly Tomoko was on her tail.

"....."

Ursula had all but given up. Tomoko hit her on the back firmly.

"At least try some evasive maneuvers."

"I've never learned any."

With that, both Haruka and Ursula were down.

Next was F/O Elma, who had been paired in a *rotte* with Ursula.

She was flying straight... away from Tomoko. After just one glance from Tomoko, F/O Elma had let out a startled yelp and began to escape, shivering all the while.

"Squadron Commander, where are you going?"

"Er, erm, just think of me as down!"

"I can't do that! Why are we doing this training? Isn't this all so we *don't* get shot down!?"

However, timid F/O Elma flew away to a distant spot away from Tomoko, where she began turning round and round in a circle. It seemed she just could not work up the courage.

What is this squadron commander *doing!?* Tomoko felt the irritation welling up,

when suddenly *byun!*, and a single round whizzed by her from above. Tomoko turned, and saw Beurling's Hurricane diving away from her. She was using the momentum from her diving attack to gain altitude again. It was a magnificent display of Striker operation.

It looked like she at least was different from the amateurs so far.

Tomoko nibbled on her lower lip lightly. It was a bad habit of hers whenever she got excited.

"Now isn't this interesting."

Tomoko flipped around, and chased after Beurling.

Tomoko expected Beurling to continue climbing to increase the pressure on herself with more hit-and-run attacks, but she was wrong.

Instead, Beurling changed directions suddenly, and began roaring straight towards Tomoko's position.

"Coming from the front? Planning on shooting at me head-on, I see."

However, Beurling slung her machine gun across her back. Then... she drew a knife from a sheath at her waist. The knife had a bend starting from the center of the blade.

A Gurkha knife.

Tomoko's grin widened.

"Now this is getting *really* interesting. She's challenging *me* to a melee fight?"

Tomoko attached the sheath back to her waist, and gripped her sword firmly.

Her actions were an obvious sign that she wouldn't be going easy on her opponent.

The distance between the two decreased quickly. One hundred meters, 70 meters, 50 meters, 20 meters... Tomoko dived and shifted to the side. Ducking, she slipped below Beurling before straightening again.

A loop.

However...

Beurling had been thinking of the same thing. Just across from where Tomoko spun around 180 degrees, Beurling was there. She was doing the same maneuver as Tomoko.

By reflex, Tomoko lashed out with her sword.

It crashed against Beurling's Gurkha knife, and sparks scattered where metal clashed on metal.

Tomoko immediately broke off and circled around.

The Hurricane could not hope to follow the second tight turn.

With a quick roll, Tomoko spun into an Immelmann turn.

She ended up right on Beurling's tail. Refusing to give up, Beurling dove downwards sharply.

"You think you can run?"

Tomoko followed Beurling in a dive, hot on her tail.

At that moment.

Tomoko suddenly noticed something approaching from behind at high speed, and spun around.

"Whoooaaaaaaaa! Please get out of the waaaay!"

It was Katharine.

What is she doing?

"What's going on!?"

"I can't stop!"

From the looks of it, after starting a steep dive, she couldn't stop the heavy-looking Buffalo.

"What the hell are you doing!"

Tomoko grabbed Katharine's arm, and tried to lift Katharine upwards. However... they continued to plunge downwards to the ground from the extreme weight of the Buffalo and Katharine, as if they really were the animal the Striker was nicknamed for. Tomoko's efforts did not do the slightest to stop their fall.

"Pull yourself back up!"

"It's impossible!"

Who knew how heavy Katharine and the Buffalo were together... it seemed she could not lift herself back up.

This is bad..., Tomoko thought, and at that moment someone's hands clapped over Katharine's left arm. It was Beurling.

Her usual surly voice came in through the headphones.

"Full throttle."

Tomoko gunned her magic engine and began rising. At last, Katharine was able to level herself off.

Somehow, the three of them together were able to regain level flight.

Finally, Tomoko sighed in relief.

She turned to face Beurling.

"I owe you one."

"You owe me? This is training."

Beurling answered in a bored tone, which somewhat annoyed Tomoko.

"You're not very easy to get along with, aren't you... This is why Britannians are all so disagreeable, I'm telling you"

"Shut up. Barbarian."

Tomoko's eyes flared at being called a barbarian.

"Just who are you calling a barbarian now! You island savage!"

"Your own Fuso is an island as well, you know."

Tomoko and Beurling cursed at one another, Katharine hanging in between the two of them.

"Please, pleeeease don't tug on me and fight!"

Tomoko mumbled to herself, certain that she would never be able to get along with Beurling.

Tomoko stood in front of the girls after landing, and began her review.

"Atrocious."

Tomoko expressed her disappointment with just that single word, everyone's shoulders drooped, except for Beurling and Ursula.

"If that's all you can do, then it'll be all over in seconds if the Neuroi were to attack. All over for you."

"Uuu... so what can we do now?" F/O Elma glanced up at Tomoko sadly.

"Training. Training! Starting from tomorrow, I'll put you through training like you never thought possible! In order for you to at least survive and make it back, I'll retrain all of you from top to bottom!"

As she finished, other than Ursula and Beurling, the remaining three began complaining.

"Eeeeeeh!?"

"What!? Where's your motivation? This is *your* life on the line here! Can't you be more serious about this!?"

As Tomoko rebuked the squadron... a laugh suddenly sprung up behind her.

"Ohohohohoho!"

"What?"

Tomoko turned around. There were about 10 girls in a line, watching Tomoko and the squadron. They were all wearing matching fur-lined leather jackets. On one sleeve was a patch with a blue cross, the insignia of the Suomus Air Force.

What was more, all of them were equipped with sharp-looking Striker units on their legs.

Apparently they were mechanized air infantry from the Suomus Air Force.

"Kapteeni Ahonen!"

As soon as F/O Elma said the name, Tomoko and Haruka burst into laughter.

"What, just what do you find so funny!?"

The girl in front shouted. She was about five centimeters taller than Tomoko, and her curly blond hair was tied back neatly with a ribbon. Below her wide forehead, her long, blue eyes flashed in anger.

The girl's bossy expression only made Tomoko continue laughing.

"Did she just say 'aho'?"

"My name is Mika Ahonen, I'll have you know! What of it? My surname is not Aho."

"Oh no, don't get me wrong, I don't have any problems with foreign names, but..."

Just as Tomoko finished, Haruka muttered in a small voice.

"Ah... Ah'ma fool."

Bwahahaha!! Tomoko erupted into laughter, clutching her stomach. She slapped Haruka heartily on the shoulder.

"You might not have much talent as a mechanized air infantryman, but you sure have good sense in some things!"

Mika Ahonen, her face burning, walked up to Tomoko, and without a word slapped her across the cheek.

Slaap! The sobering sound thawed the cold Suomus air.

"What do you think you're doing!?"

"Is that the way to speak to a superior officer? You insolent foreigner."

"Did you just call me an *insolent foreigner*?"

Tomoko raised an eyebrow.

"We're here to save your country, you know! Is that all you've got to say, after we came all the way here to the middle of nowhere?"

Kapt. Mika Ahonen waved a hand through her hair. Her golden curls sparkled.

"It's true we asked for help. For help from people that we could rely on, that is!"

"And that's why we're here."

"Excuse me? Excuse me? In what way could we rely on you? No matter how you look at it, the Strikers you are using are all second-rate models!"

It was a sore spot for Tomoko. She pressed her mouth shut quickly.

"We were watching your training session from the ground just now! I suppose I could say it was *quite* an eye-opener?"

The girl's words hit an even more sore spot for Tomoko, who dropped into dead silence, clenching her fists tightly. Kapteeni Mika Ahonen walked up to her, and played a hand along Tomoko's flushed cheek.

"Oh my, such a disagreeable little child we have here. Such an impertinent and unpleasant Oriental! I must ask that you not get in the way of the real fighting forces like us. Could you promise me that? Luutnantti Elma?"

Kapt. Mika Ahonen turned towards F/O Elma. She shrunk away from the other girl.

"It's a fitting task for the number one misfit of 1st Squadron, wouldn't you say? Commander' of the 'Misfits Squadron'. Isn't that right?"

The mechanized air infantrymen assembled behind Kapteeni Mika Ahonen laughed loudly.

Shamefacedly, F/O Elma's gaze dropped to the floor.

"'Misfits Squadron'?" Tomoko asked incredulously.

"That's right. I've read the reports on all of you. It would seem that all of your were dumped by your countries, unwanted junk passed on to someone else just to be rid of it."

"That ain't true!"

Katharine cut in to disagree with the girl.

Kapt. Mika Ahonen laughed.

"Oh, it is very true, Miss 'Crusher' of the Liberian Navy! Let me ask you, starting from when you were in your flight academy up to now, just how many Strikers have you wrecked?"

"I don't know?"

"Sixty-two. That must make you an ace."

"They were very unfortunate accidents, I know."

"Oh, no, as far as I can tell from the records, they were all 'accidents' caused by human error... your errors."

And, Kapt. Mika Ahonen waved Katharine away, ending the conversation.

"Now, how about the silver-haired puppy over there?"

She turned towards Beurling next. Because she had merged with her dachshund

familiar, a pair of cute dog ears had appeared on Beurling's head.

"While with the Britannian Air Force, you have broken 82 military regulations, written 232 official letters of apology, been jailed 54 times, court-martialed 8 times... and nearly executed by firing squad three times... Quite a remarkable trouble-maker."

Beurling began slowly counting something off on her fingers.

"I've been jailed 55 times."

"That's not something to be proud of! I can't believe this! Suomus is not Britannia's prison colony! Honestly... when will they ever put an end to their foolishness. In any case, as for our little Karlslander here...?"

Ursula adjusted her glasses.

"Yes, ma'am."

"I hear you wiped out an entire squadron in Karlsland during one of your 'experiments'."

"I was merely testing a newly developed airborne munition."

"And because of that, an entire squadron was heavily injured... So, I must wonder, what kind of experiments did you come to Suomus to perform? Do be a good girl while you're here."

Ursula did not answer.

Kapt. Mika Ahonen pointed at Haruka next. Before she had even said a word, Haruka started shouting.

"Y-Yes, ma'am! I'm sorry! I've been called junk ever since the Yokohama Flotilla of the Fuso Imperial Navy was created! They call me 'Friendly Fire Sakomizu', so they even told me not to fire my machine gun! I'm sorry, ma'am. Sorry. I'm really sorry. I'm sorry I was ever born."

A wide cat-like sneer appeared on Kapt. Mika Ahonen's face as she watched Haruka.

"Very good. I like honest girls like you."

Kapt. Mika Ahonen briskly walked up to Haruka, and raised her chin with one hand.

"Eh? Eh? Eeeeh? Heeh!? Ngmmph!!"

Haruka had no idea what to expect at first, when suddenly the officer placed her own lips firmly on Haruka's.

"Mmphhhhhhh!!"

Their lips parted, and Haruka let out the breath she had been holding with a huff as she toppled to the floor in a daze. Tomoko rushed up and grabbed the officer's uniform jacket collar, and shouted in her face.

"Whoa, wha-, wait a second! What do you think you're doing!?"

"She interests me, so I gave her a friendly greeting."

"A greeting? Don't you think it's a bit strange to go kissing another girl on the lips?"

"My my, everyone is free to love."

Tomoko felt despair well up inside her. *Do I really have to fight on the same side as this lesbian pervert...?*

Kapt. Mika Ahonen stepped close to Haruka, who was sitting on the floor in a shocked heap, hugging her knees. She crooned.

"Hey there. Why don't you dump that Misfits Squadron, and come to my squadron? I'll even make you my 'wing-sister'. Oho! Ohohohoho!"

The girls from 1st Squadron all began crowding around at those words, each of them trying to speak to Kapt. Ahonen at the same time.

"How could you, Sister! You're so mean!"

"What are you thinking by taking on more and more sisters!"

Tomoko watched the commotion, shocked. Apparently Kapt. Ahonen treated her squadron as her personal harem.

"In any case, you're free to arrange training, and use the airfield as well... but do make sure you don't get in our way. Is that clear, Luutnantti Elma?"

F/O Elma gave a small, hesitant dip of her head in agreement.

"And right now, we're rather busy with these brand new Messer *E*s we bought from Karlsland, so if you could please stop wasting our time...?"

At last, Tomoko recognized the smart and sharp Strikers glinting on the legs of all of the girls in 1st Squadron.

"Kuh..." Tomoko bit her lip in frustration.

Kapt. Ahonen, her eyes filled with disdain, took a long, hard look at Tomoko's sour expression.

"You must be Pilot Officer Anabuki Tomoko."

"That's right!"

"Don't get full of yourself just because you managed to shoot down a few Neuroi."

"What did you say?"

"What do you think you can do by yourself? Air battles are about teamwork! After all, your 'squadron' is just a mob. Even if the Neuroi come, please be good little children and play quietly in the base. Otherwise, you would only be a distraction."

Tomoko clenched her fists tightly.

Her feelings of shame steadily ramped up.

Suddenly, as if she had just come to, she thrust a finger at Kapt. Ahonen.

"I-I'm not someone who's going to lose to you lot!"

"Is that so? Do take your time and practice then... so long as you don't get in our way!"

Laughing loudly once more, Kapt. Ahonen left along with the rest of her lackeys.

Left behind was Tomoko, shaking in rage. She shouted after Ahonen's departing figure.

"I'll have you eat those words soon enough!"

Chapter 4 - Tomoko's Depression

"Weren't any of you ashamed by that at all!?"

Tomoko slammed the desk she was at as she shouted.

The squadron was in the same warehouse as the briefing room before. One of the rooms there had been walled off using spare building materials, forming a makeshift barracks.

Tomoko and the rest of the squadron were eating dinner in the mess hall, which doubled as a rest area.

It was a dreary room, with nothing but a few rickety chairs and tables, all worn from use, set up in the center of the room. Two sooty wood-burning stoves sent irregular drafts of warm wind circulating through the air.

Nine o'clock at night.

It was just before lights-out, so the squadron was off-duty.

After Tomoko's rant, the only one who had shown any sign of remorse was Haruka. Everyone else in the squadron just looked like they could go with the flow, no matter where it brought them.

As usual, Ursula was immersed in some extremely dense book. Katharine was sitting nearby listening to the radio, munching on a piece of bread she had stolen from somewhere. Beurling sat alone in the corner, playing with her dachshund familiar.

Faced by such apathy, Tomoko's tone sharpened.

"We're being labeled as *misfits* you know!"

"Now now, have some coffee..." F/O Elma said, as she placed a cup in front of Tomoko.

Tomoko grabbed the cup, and downed the entire contents in one gulp.

"But it was so hot..." F/O Elma whispered to herself quietly.

"Not hot enough!"

Tomoko shouted angrily.

"Um, I used boiling water though..."

"Not the coffee! You! All of you! How can you all be so lifeless!?"

With a loud tsk, Tomoko switched tactics. She headed straight to Ursula, pulled away her book, and spoke to the young girl directly.

"Hey Ursula. They're playing you for a fool, you know? They're saying you're useless! Don't you see that!?"

"Other people's opinions are of no concern to me. As long as it does not interfere with my research, I am fine with it."

She took the book back from Tomoko, and began reading once again.

"Well, Pilot Officer O'Hare."

"Please call me Katharine."

"Well then, Katharine, don't you feel *anything* from being ridiculed like that? Doesn't it get that frontier spirit your country is so well known for burning?"

"My daddy always said, 'Let people say what they want to say'."

"They're saying too much here though!"

"Well, me, I'm fine with anything. It's a bit cold here, but I can live with it."

Shaking her head slowly, Tomoko turned to F/O Elma next.

"Y-Yes! What is it, Pilot Officer? Ma'am."

Without thinking, F/O Elma had added a 'Ma'am' while speaking to Tomoko,

who was lower-ranking.

"Ma'am, don't you think that the reception we're receiving is unacceptable, after all that's been done to bring our help to Suomus?"

"E-Eh, well... what I want to say is..." F/O Elma stumbled for words.

"We didn't bring the military prowess you were hoping for?"

Tomoko grimaced as if she had eaten a bug.

"I-I wonder why too... ahaha..."

F/O Elma suddenly laughed nervously.

"I hit the nail right on the head, didn't I? Let's not even give food to that useless 'help', huh?"

Tomoko pointed at the watery soup on the table.

"Or rooms!"

She pointed to the walls and the numerous gaps in them next.

"They think it's alright to treat us like this! Isn't that right!?"

Faced by Tomoko's threatening attitude, F/O Elma nodded by reflex.

"So it's not just the commanders on top, even you yourself think that!"

Tomoko shook in rage for several seconds, but then put on a determined face. She started shouting again.

"Hey, all of you! Doesn't this annoy you? We're being treated as unwanted trash by the very country that we came all the way here to help! Show some life! Don't you want to do this?"

As Tomoko finished, Beurling stood up, scratching her head.

"You know, it really doesn't make a difference if we want to or not."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm only here on orders."

"But, you're always insubordinate! And yet, you're saying that because it's an order you can stand this kind of treatment?"

"I have nowhere else to go."

And with that, Beurling resumed playing with her familiar once again.

"There's food, I get a place to sleep, and best of all, I don't get hassled day in and day out. There's really nothing for me to complain about."

Tomoko was shaking again, but she suppressed her rage.

For now, what she had to do was to make sure that the squadron was ready, and ensure that the squadron would not in actual fact be useless when the Neuroi came. She could never live with herself if that actually happened. She could never get back at the Karlslander detachment if that were to happen.

"In any case, starting tomorrow, we're starting flight drills every morning at 0600 sharp! I expect to see everyone ready on the airfield!"

Finished for the time being, Tomoko retreated to her personal room.

The room that had been assigned to her was ramshackle like the rest of the building. All officers were assigned rooms, but given the condition of the room, the enlisted troops' barracks were most likely more comfortable.

Her room appeared to originally be one of the storerooms in the warehouse. Half of the room was occupied by dusty wooden cases. Three of those cases had been set apart and covered with sheets and a blanket.

It was probably meant to be a bed.

Her familiar, Konbei, yawned, and curled itself into a ball on the floor.

Soon, it was snoring lightly. After the long journey, then the sudden mock

dogfight, Tomoko was also exhausted. Her entire body felt flushed for some reason.

She stripped from her flight uniform, throwing the miko-like outfit roughly to the floor, and stood there in just her underwear. She unwrapped the sarashi around her chest, exposing her perfectly-sized breasts.

She unwrapped the traditional cloth-wrapped bundle she had brought with her, and removed an old-fashioned padded kimono.

She put that on over her bare body. It was a somewhat peculiar outfit, but that was how Tomoko always slept during the winter months.

She crossed the room, fell into her bed, and closed her eyes, but opened them again soon after.

"It's cold..."

It was hardly an unreasonable complaint. The gaps between the boards making up her floor let a strong draft of freezing air come into the room. The frigid gusts of snowy arctic wind were just cold enough that they could not be ignored. Tomoko broke apart one of the crates in her room, trying to cover the holes as best she could with the pieces, and just as she was contemplating nailing the boards in place to stop the drafts once and for all, she heard a small knock on her door.

"Who is it?"

"...It's me."

Haruka's voice came from behind the door.

"It's open."

The door opened, and Haruka peeked into the room from the gap.

"What is it?"

Haruka was wearing a *hanten* jacket for pajamas, which brought back nostalgic memories of home. Tomoko saw that Haruka was clutching an old pillow to her

chest, which she must have brought from Fuso.

"Um... well, I was thinking of going to bed after all that, but, I couldn't fall asleep..."

"Come in."

Tomoko invited Haruka into her room.

"There's no helping you, is there? I'll let you sleep with me tonight then."

With a small nod, Haruka crept into the room and slipped into Tomoko's bed.

"I'm sorry."

Haruka apologized. Her short, neatly cropped hair gave her a very young appearance. Even if she was a witch, she was still only a 12- or 13-year-old girl. In an unfamiliar country, it was not surprising at all that she felt uneasy.

"It's fine. Don't worry about it. Anybody would feel uneasy in a foreign country."

"No... that's not what I meant."

"Hm?"

"Because of me, even you're getting this way, Anabuki Shou-i... Just because I'm useless junk, you're being treated the same as me, and..."

"It's not really your fault, you know."

Tomoko's words did little to put Haruka at ease.

"No... it is my fault... Even when I was with the Yokohama Flotilla, I was always getting in the others' way. That's why, when it was decided that only I would be going to Suomus, I was a bit relieved. I thought that at last I wouldn't have to pull down everyone else... but, but now..."

A soft sniff escaped from Haruka.

"But now, it's the worst situation imaginable, I'm getting in the way of the one person I respect the most... sniff."

"Like I said, it's not really your fault."

Tomoko spoke gently, trying to soothe Haruka.

"No... a quarter of it is my fault. That definitely counts as pulling you down."

"If that's so, then you just have to try your best. Just get even with those that were ridiculing you."

Haruka gave a small nod. Then, she looked up at Tomoko with heated eyes.

"What is it?"

"Ah, no! It's, it's nothing..."

Then, a tone of determination entered Haruka's voice, as if she had made some sort of decision.

"Um... Anabuki Shou-i..."

"Hmm?"

"People say that once you go to a foreign country, you start to miss miso soup, right?"

"I suppose."

I wonder what she's getting at, Tomoko wondered to herself.

"Um, well then... if you want to have some miso soup, then please have me."

"Excuse me?"

Tomoko stared at Haruka. She had pulled the blanket up, covering half of her face, and was trembling slightly. Below her short, cropped hair, she was blushing red up to her eyes.

Below her short, cropped hair, she was blushing red up to her eyes.

"By 'have you', you mean..."

"I, um... I'm really useless, so I thought that this is the only way I could be of use to you... Um, that is, if you're fine with me."

Seeing how serious Haruka was, Tomoko could not help but laugh.

"Y-You're laughing, that's so mean..."

"Sorry, sorry. That just got really weird..."

"I am serious."

"Now, look here, you're a girl, right? And you know, two girls, well... Whatever the circumstances may be, that's..."

"Then, have you ever done it with a man?"

"Well, no, but... wait, what are you making me say!?"

And, as Tomoko shouted, Haruka pulled the blanket over the rest of her head.

"Then, why don't you try it out and touch me..."

"Wha-?"

"Just try it... you might enjoy it."

With little other choice, Tomoko put her hand under the blanket.

Even if Haruka had said to touch her, Tomoko had no idea what to do, and tried moving her fingers as if she were playing a piano. Under the blanket, Haruka's body began to tremble softly.

Tomoko's finger reached a point close to Haruka's breast, where she started a staccato rhythm, and underneath the blanket, Haruka's figure tightened like a closing mouth. She was gripping the blanket tightly.

"Have you... always done this, with other girls?"

Tomoko asked in a surprised voice, but Haruka did not answer. Tomoko wondered if the navy was always like this... Or maybe because they were always on ships, they never did.

This is getting awkward, Tomoko thought, and she pulled away her hand.

She ducked her head under the blanket, and whispered into Haruka's ear.

"Go to sleep."

"Eh?"

Haruka replied, in a somewhat disappointed and surprised tone. So afraid, that she didn't want to see. But, she also wanted to see. That was the unforeseen dilemma that pervaded her thoughts.

"You've got a long day tomorrow."

"Y-Yes, ma'am..."

Haruka was left alone with her thoughts.

Even if I were to take all of the happiness I had experienced throughout my life, that would be nothing compared to those short, few seconds just now.

Ah, she's so magnificent...

With a feverish expression on her face, Haruka glanced sideways at Tomoko, who was sleeping beside her.

Her padded kimono, her disheveled sleeping posture. She was so pale, and beautiful... Haruka drank in every detail of the perfect symmetry of her figure.

The one person she had always admired was right beside her.

In a voice too small to be heard, Haruka mumbled to herself.

Her tone was dreamy, as if she no longer cared about a thing.

"Aah, Tomoko-oneesama... This body and heart of mine, will always be yours..."

As Haruka made her decision, she thought to herself again. *Ahh, I can never let her see me like this.* Thatthought welled up inside her becoming bigger and stronger in her heart, as she went to sleep.

"Mhgghhmgmmh, c'mon, ya cows, not thatta way, the coyotes'll come... mhhgmmghhhh."

As Katharine was deep in her dream about her hometown in Texas, the door to her room slammed open with a loud bang.

"It is morning, ma'am!"

"Wha-'s izit..."

As Katharine sprang awake, Haruka walked up to the foot of her bed and glared down at her.

"Haruka? What in the world is happening, now, hmm?"

"It is just as P/O Tomoko said! We will have training first thing in the morning, ma'am!"

"Well, yes, but..." Katharine pointed a finger towards the window.

"There's a blizzard today, so let's all just do it tomorrow, okay?"

"That is not possible, ma'am! Ready no matter the weather is P/O Tomoko's motto, ma'am!"

Katharine sighed, defeated, and slowly got out of bed.

Shivering all the while, Katharine headed toward the airfield, where she found Ursula and F/O Elma already waiting, looking miserable in an arctic weather uniform and matching hood.

Ursula, despite the drifts of snow falling from the sky, was reading a book as usual.

F/O Elma nibbled on her lip, making nervous glances up at the dreary sky.

"So, you're here."

Tomoko said, her miko robes spotless and pleated as if on parade, as Katharine stumbled sleepily onto the airfield.

"Tomoko, ain't you cold?"

"You only feel cold because you *think* you're cold. To those at one with themselves, the flames are but a cool breeze."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It's a saying from my country. Complaining of the cold when you have training to do is simply proof that you lack focus and the will to improve yourself."

"It's cold if it's cold!"

Katharine shivered.

"At least let me get some hot coffee first!"

Tomoko ignored Katharine's protests, and turned to Haruka.

"Where's the insane island savage?

"Do you mean P/O Beurling? Um, well, she had her door locked, and didn't come out..."

Tomoko's mouth flattened into a grin. However, the look in her eyes made it clear that she was amused. In fact, it was more of a predatory grin.

"OH! My, that smile! You're scaring me!"

Katharine exclaimed.

F/O Elma merely ducked her head into the protective cover of her own arms, shivering in fear.

And Ursula simply continued reading.

Tomoko stomped angrily into the barracks, and pounded her fists on Beurling's door.

"Hey, you! Get up, NOW!"

There was no answer.

Tomoko unsheathed her sword smoothly. The blade arced towards the door with a flash of light.

With a bam, the door was cut in two even parts. Tomoko stepped into the room.

However... the bed was completely empty.

Tomoko gaze darted about the rest of the room.

"Where have you gone now!?"

As she finished shouting, a voice answered from behind her.

"Over here."

As Tomoko turned around, she saw Beurling leaning against the wall of the corridor behind her, staring back at her. Tomoko made two quick and purposeful steps towards the other girl.

A metallic clang came from a point on the wall just beside Beurling's face, now occupied by Tomoko's katana.

"We have training now. Where were you?"

Tomoko glared into Beurling's eyes like a demon.

"I was taking a walk."

Beurling's expression remained as cool as ever.

"Everyone else is already assembled. Now hurry up and get over there!"

However, Beurling just stepped past Tomoko into her room.

"Where are you going now!?"

"To bed."

"To *bed*, you, you..."

Beurling paid no heed to Tomoko's words, and slowly stripped off her clothes. Then, she crept into her bed, and began snoring lightly within seconds.

With one quick swing, Tomoko positioned the blade of her katana exactly on the other girl's cheek.

"You will get up now, or I will cut you apart."

Beurling mumbled in bored tone in reply.

"Be my guest."

"Excuse me?"

"I've always wanted to end this pointless life of mine."

Tomoko bit on her lip angrily, but stepped back.

"If you want help killing yourself, ask someone else! You better be there tomorrow!"

As Tomoko, shaking in rage, returned to the airfield, Haruka scurried to her side with a worried expression.

"Did you find P/O Beurling?"

"Just forget about her. She is nothing but worthless."

"She's so talented, and yet lets it all go to waste."

Haruka sighed,

Then... Tomoko noticed that a number of people were missing.

"What's this? Where's Ursula and Katharine?"

Only F/O Elma, standing in one spot looking extremely nervous, and Haruka were left.

In a very apologetic tone, Haruka mumbled a reply.

"Um... they left."

"Left?"

"Yes ma'am... F/O Katharine said it was cold. Then, F/Sgt Ursula said there was a book she wanted to read..."

Tomoko collapsed to her knees.

"What is wrong with them! Don't they have any motivation at ALL!?"

"I-I don't think they do...?"

Elma murmured quietly.

Tomoko sprang to her feet suddenly, and shouted.

"Fine then! We'll do the training with just the people here!"

Haruka and F/O Elma were in for a world of trouble, training under a raging Tomoko.

Chapter 5 - Neuroi Invasion

Two weeks had passed since Tomoko and the others had arrived at Kauhava Air Force Base. Tomoko had continued her training but Beurling, Katharine and Ursula hadn't taken part. Even though she had F/O Elma and Haruka, they were useless. If it was any bonus at all, the two had an overwhelming sense of 'fighting spirit'.

F/O Elma was cowardly, and Haruka was useless at flying. Recently she'd realised that her attentiveness to her surroundings had worn thin, and that could make aerial combat fatal.

If we carry on like this, we might become a specialist reconnaissance unit…, she murmured.

Tomoko was in the middle of a short break in the mess hall of the barracks. Haruka and Elma had received rigorous training throughout the morning and consequently were returning to their own rooms. She wasn't sure what the remaining three were doing. They hadn't shown themselves for the entire duration of mealtime.

If things continue the way they are, what will become of the Suomus Independent Volunteer Air Squadron, I wonder? Never in my time as a soldier have I been called by such a name. But now things are different, as the public dub us the "Misfits Squadron". Well, it's quite an appropriate name for us.

If I'm thinking absent mindedly…

Even though it seemed a little pathetic, Tomoko got depressed thinking about how radically the way she lived had changed since coming to Suomus.

I kind of…, feel like I've become nothing but a leftover. How is it acceptable to leave ME, the Tomoegozen of Fuso, who people go to length of calling an ace, to rot into obscurity in a place like this? Why is it that *I* have to endure such a hassle? This isn't the right place to further my ability and achievements…

Tomoko picked up the newspaper lying beside her. It was the Britannia Times newspaper, put down for the use of the volunteer soldiers. On the front page,

news of the war situation in Karlsland stood out. Upon seeing the large news report in the second column, her eyes widened.

‘The outstanding performance of the witches from the East’

Yesterday, a large scale Neuroi bombing raid formation manifested in München, Karlsland. The scale of the response was that of a large bombing operation with around 120 machines (a large number of them were the Tupolev Tu-2). In place of the Karlslander Air Force, which has been weakened by the rigorous fighting since the outbreak of war, the assault was carried out by militants from the United States of Liberion, Britannia and Fuso’s Volunteer Air Squadron. P/O Katou Takeko from the Fuso Imperial Army Air Service’s third squadron’s actions were particularly commendable as she shot down and destroyed a total of bomber units. In the results of the battle, 60% of the enemy units were hit. P/O Katou Takeko shot down 4 units on her own. (Giving her the highest individual rank for shoot downs). In commendation of this achievement, Karlsland have decided to award P/O Katou with the Iron Cross.

Tomoko’s shoulders dropped, she was crestfallen. She was glad for her friend’s achievement, but there was no way she could match it in a place like Suomus.

I can’t keep letting these high aspirations escape me.

But I’ve just got no willpower left.

We’re off duty after lunch. It seemed like a good idea to train…but it’s pointless.

Tomoko stood up unsteadily, leaving the mess hall.

Close to Kauhava Air Force Base, was a town called Slussen. It was around 30 minutes away by car. Slussen was a small town with a population of around 2,000 people. Tomoko had asked the base guards if she could head out there, and they had prepared her a car. It was difficult to drive on the streets layered with the slush caused by freshly fallen snow - from the base, it was one straight drive all the way to Slussen. It was Christmas in a month’s time, and Slussen had already begun preparations. The invasion of countries near the border by the Neuroi did nothing to stop the residents from having cheerful looks upon their faces.

As Tomoko got out the car, she realised that it must be unusual to see an Oriental

person - people had stopped what they were doing just to stare at her. Curious children began to approach Tomoko, speaking a few words to her. No matter how hard she tried to speak it, Tomoko couldn't understand Suomish, and had no idea what the children were saying.

"Sorry…I don't understand your language. Um, Hyvää- Hyvää Päivää"

When she spoke the Suomish that she could remember the children burst into laughter.

"Hyvää Päivää!"

After that, the children continued to speak in Suomish. As Tomoko was in a spot of bother, an elderly person came to her aid.

"Are you a foreigner?"

The words were spoken in Britannian. As Tomoko nodded her head with a yes, the elderly person translated the words of the children.

"They're asking if you're a witch."

"Huh? How did they know that?" Tomoko was bewildered.

"Well, a lot of cars come from Kauhava Air Force Base, not to mention you're foreign, and a beautiful young girl. It adds up, doesn't it? Aren't the witches the ones that came here to fight the Neuroi? That's what the children know you for."

"Ah, I see. Your English really is impressive."

"Ah, I used to be a university lecturer, although I'm currently retired…"

The children began tugging at Tomoko's arm.

"Eh? Where do you want to go?"

"'Won't you come to our house?' - They're inviting you."

"Where is your house?"

As she asked, they didn't understand her speech, but understood her gesture, and

the oldest child pointed at the corner of the street. There stood a magnificent building made of brick.

“Wow! It’s big isn’t it? Don’t you live in such a wonderful house! Do all of you live in this house?”

As Tomoko enquired about the house, the elderly person answered her.

“This house it…how should I put it…it’s an orphanage.”

“An orphanage you say?”

Tomoko was a little taken aback.

“Unfortunately so, these children’s parents have passed away and can no longer raise them. They’re children with nowhere left to go.”

If Tomoko left suddenly, the children could get upset. The elderly person lent her a hand and guided them. The children began to look a little lonely, but they soon brightened up as they said something to Tomoko.

“Good luck fighting the Neuroi!”

The words lingered in her mind for a while, and then she smiled. As she did so, the children’s smiles began to fade away. She waved to them for a while, until the children had disappeared into the entrance of the orphanage. She let out a sigh. The words of the children weren't easy to swallow.

“Good luck fighting the Neuroi!” huh…

I wonder if I can finally reach the point where I can do my best…

“Is there a bar in this area?”

Tomoko asked the elderly person.

The elderly person pointed to a house they were facing. Beneath a barrel shaped sign was a building with a façade that resembled that of a bar. Tomoko was feeling miserable, and went to seek solace in drinking alcohol.

‘Giii’ the door creaked, as she opened it and entered. Despite the fact that it was

lunchtime, the inside retained a gloomy atmosphere. Nevertheless, it didn't seem shady. Meals were served alongside coffee for lunch, and half of the tables in the bar were filled. It was no surprise that an Oriental person would be easily noticed - all at once, the occupants of the bar began directing their attention towards Tomoko. However, it wasn't anything to be concerned about, so Tomoko seated herself at the counter, and gestured towards the alcohol she wanted to order. She'd grown used to receiving attention when she was in her own country.

Even though she'd intended to order wine, she ended up with a washed out looking, transparent alcohol. Upon taking a mouthful of the drink, the strength activated her gag reflex. The middle aged bartender glared at her, saying 'coss, coss' with a pleasant smile. It seemed like it might be the name of the drink.

At any rate I should get this drink down. It feels like a burning sensation coursing through my throat, the inside of my stomach feels as if a fire is raging .I get it; this alcohol helps you forget the coldness.I guess they rely on strong alcohol like this instead of heaters in snowy countries. I can feel it in my heart too, but I don't feel warm at all. Most of all…, it's unforgiveable that I feel no joy for Takeko's military gains. How could I possibly be jealous at the success of a close friend…

Tomoko caved in disgust.

It looks like I'm downing a large amount. After several drinks, when I asked the bartender for seconds, he shook his head. He brought over a bottle of alcohol, did a drinking gesture, and then made a cross sign. I…guess I've probably had a little too much to drink…

As she inadvertently turned her gaze to the bars interior, she recognised three all too familiar people. She hadn't noticed up until now due to the hustle and bustle and dim lighting in the bar. For some reason or another, even though she was in their line of sight, they hadn't noticed that Tomoko was seated at the bar either. Tomoko stood up and began to head in their direction.

"Well, that sure was fun! If we keep drinking like this, we might accidentally forget that we're in the middle of a war with the Neuroi!" Katharine had her back turned towards Tomoko. Seated around her, Ursula was reading a book. Next to her was Beurling with her usual pessimistic facial expression, drinking

alcohol from a small glass.

“I thought that I hadn’t seen you around the base much recently, why doesn’t it surprise me that you were in this kind of place?” The three of them turned around as they heard Tomoko’s unsympathetic voice.

“OH, Tomoko! Let’s drink together!” Katharine asked in a typically carefree voice, seemingly unbothered by Tomoko’s tone.

With a thump, Tomoko grabbed a chair and sat down. Katharine took the opportunity to fill the glass Tomoko was holding with wine. Not satisfied with the gesture, Tomoko grabbed the bottle of wine from Katharine and downed the remainder without so much as taking a breather.

“OH”

Tomoko brought the wine bottle up into the air, and vigorously slammed it down on the table. She then surveyed the scene with an intoxicated look about her.

“You lot don’t give a damn about your abilities. Understand?”

“What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

Beurling responded first, looking in Tomoko’s direction.

“We’re the chosen witches, aren’t we? You lot, you don’t have any sense of responsibility! I mean come on, how is it acceptable to be skipping your training and duties to get drunk at lunchtime!?” Tomoko interjected sharply, forgetting her own hypocrisy. After she had spoken, Beurling downed the drink in her glass. She opened her mouth after speaking.

“Even mentioning something like ‘responsibility’ is a bother. Why should I care? I didn’t desire to be a witch. It’s like, just because you’ve got magical power, you should automatically become a witch, before you can even say anything against it. Not just anyone could long to be a witch. The girls who couldn’t become them ended up as actresses in Piccadilly. In other words, we were automatically made out to be ‘witches’. We didn’t have a choice in coming here either, did we? That’s what I mean.”

Uncharacteristically, Katharine let out a sigh.

“I definitely longed to be a witch! But, I just might not have any talent…Just because you’ve got magical powers don’t mean you’re gonna be any good with equipment. Even though you need magical power to be a witch, it doesn’t mean that everyone who has those kinda abilities is gonna have any skill in airborne operations.” Katharine said in a slightly solemn tone of voice.

“Even if you’re trying your best, it’s so easy to become a nuisance…It really doesn’t help any negatives feelings of being ‘useless’.”

Without uttering a single word, Ursula placed her book atop the surface of the table.

“Please be quieter. I can’t focus.”

“I see how it is. Well, just know that I expect nothing from any of you lot.”

Tomoko sighed. After that, she stood up, and left the bar.

The remaining Beurling group exchanged glances.

“’Expect nothing’ huh…It’s always the same words, being said over and over again.”

Katharine muttered with a feeling of self derision.

“Indeed so.” Beurling agreed.

“No matter where we go, we’re labelled as misfits.”

“I agree.”

From her book, Ursula nodded her head.

Katharine observed Beurling and Ursula’s reactions for a while, and then spoke in a tone of voice that suggested that she’d noticed something. “Oh my, could it be that you two are going to put up with what Tomoko just said?”

There was silence from both Beurling and Ursula. Katharine took a hold of the glass in front of her, and gulped the contents down.

“I really think we oughta change a little from here on out. But if we carry on like

this we'll achieve nothing. The only way to stretch everyone's legs is to take part in training. If we stay here, we are misfits."

"Humph. For people like us, no matter what our whereabouts are, we'll always be misfits. Of course we'd be misfits if we keep coming here like this, let's just leave it at that."

Beurling snapped back in disgust.

"We can't give up hope. When it was decided that we would be permanently to Suomus there was a small amount of expectation, right? They might have thought that our skills might get better in a place like this. It's not impossible for people to change."

Beurling was silenced. Her lack of response suggested to Katharine that she might harbour the same feelings.

"Say, Ursula. Don't you think that too?"

Ursula didn't answer. She hung her head in shame with loneliness, biting on her lip.

Then there was that time.

Classical music flowed elegantly throughout the interior of the bar. The elegance was soon interrupted as it changed abruptly to a state broadcast from Suomus. After the crackle of the grating sounds had ended, the announcer's peculiar voice reverberated from the speakers.

"This is a message for the people of Suomus. This is a message for the people of Suomus."

People were talking amongst themselves; this definitely wasn't a normal occurrence.

"Formations of 'Neuroi' are advancing across the national border. I will repeat. Formations of 'Neuroi' are advancing across the national border. Respective cities near the borders have sounded the air alarm as an official announcement.

Please calmly follow the directions of the military, and seek refuge. This is not a drill. I repeat. This is not a drill.”

The occupants of the bar flew into a panic. It was frenzied, a commotion, people were dashing outside, hiding under tables, beginning to cry, the assortment of different reactions were all laced with fear.

Katharine and the others hadn’t understood the radio transmission. There was only one word that they had even remotely understood.

‘Neuroi’

When they stood up, they could hear the sound of explosions from outside. The three of them dropped onto the floor out of an act of instinct. The explosion sounds were intermittent - the sound of several more explosions reverberated, before stopping abruptly.

They exchanged confused glances as they dashed out of the bar. An eerie miasma had begun to spread outside. The Neuroi formation was dropping bombs. The sound of fire engine sirens drew closer. Several buildings had collapsed due to the bombing. If there was one good thing, it was that there wasn’t a huge number of enemy aircraft. Taking into account the number of bombs, it was likely that there was a place where most of the formation was. Small enemy numbers or not, the peaceful town had been so brutally assaulted and then abandoned within the time frame of ten minutes. The bodies of people who had been injured or killed by fragments of the bombs were scattered all over. The survivors, who had up until now been walking with such peaceful faces, had been so suddenly thrown into such a terrible disaster, and were now nursing those who had been wounded.

A group of children were standing around a collapsed building, in tears.

“What is it? Are you alright? Have you got any injuries?”

Katharine got closer. The children responded, but it was no use. Katharine couldn’t understand what they were saying and shook her head.

Luckily, Ursula could understand Suomish, and listened carefully to what the children had to say.

“It seems like this was an orphanage for these children.”

She looked at the desecrated building solemnly. Katherine looked in the direction of the children, it seemed like they were going to cry.

“An orphanage, huh.” Beurling muttered in an uncharacteristically emotive voice.

“…Their house, it’s completely gone. Even though they live here because they have nowhere else to go…in the end it’s all gone.”

“All because of war”

Beurling murmured with a sigh.

Katharine nodded her head, “It’s terrible. They’ve got nowhere to go and only us for support. All in the space of ten minutes...”

After splashing her face with water to dissolve her drunkenness, Tomoko began to drive along the road that led back to Kauhava Air Force Base. After doing so for a while, she could hear the sound of explosions in the distance. She hastily turned on the radio, hearing the announcer cry out a repeat of the warning. She couldn’t understand Suomish, but there was one unpleasant word in that broadcast that made perfect sense.

‘Neuroi’

They arrived just now…Those guys…

“For god’s sake, they sure are good with their timing!”

At that instant, she thrust her foot onto the accelerator. In front of her was a small black mark. As she noticed it, it began to expand in size. Tomoko grasped onto the handle, sending a flurry of mud springing up from the wheels.

Machine gun fire!

Next to Tomoko, a black shadow began to roll past with a pyun!

Small wings protruded from its large torso. At the nose was a propeller that was similar to that of a Striker Unit. It was cylindrical, and seemed to be in the shape of a fly, a melee weapon Neuroi…It was the silhouette of the Neuroi she had fought in Fuso, the Laros.

Ku!

Tomoko chewed on her lip.

At the one time I'm not at the base, the enemy start an invasion! Witches are powerless on the Earth's surface. If I return to the base quickly, they can't ambush us! I can still see that Laros from before in the rear mirror. It's turning from side to side, I wonder if it's going to attack again.

Tomoko pushed onto the accelerator faster, but it was already in the 5th gear and wouldn't go any further. All the while, the Laros continued to pursue her. In the rear mirror, the wings of the Laros started to glow. She quickly thrust her body down, and heard the sound of glass shattering into little pieces, pieces that scattered around the cars interior. As she raised her head, it wasn't just the rear window that had been smashed; the glass of the front windscreen had also shattered. Fortunately, her body hadn't been harmed, but…

In front of her, she could see the Laros rotating. It seemed like it had an intention of being persistent with its assault. Tomoko began to grind her teeth. I don't want to die like this! Without a striker unit I'm powerless…

The Laros pointed the tip of it's nose in her direction…

Suddenly, the wings burst into flames, and it began to spin, flipping around sideways. From above, she could see something small do a nose dive. It was a mechanised air infantryman.

Who could that be? Could it be F/O Elma, or Haruka? However, the silhouette is different from either of them. It's probably one of those guys from the 1st Squadron.

She was relieved to have been saved, but she felt more frustration than anything else.

Flt Lt Mika Ahonen's 'darling' face passed into her mind.

I can’t believe I was saved by a person like that…I barely made it back to Kauhava Air Force Base…Over there it must be a disastrous scene. The Neuroi’s surprise attack was clever. They destroyed buildings, and flames are spreading everywhere.

She ran towards the hanger where the Striker Units were, inside F/O Elma and Haruka were shaking, embracing each other.

“What are you doing!?”

Tomoko shouted, calling out to the aircraft men.

“Get out my Ki-27! Hurry up!”

They ran over, equipping Tomoko with the Ki-27. She idled along the runway, before flying up into the sky. From the earpiece attached to her ear, she could hear the voice of Flt Lt Häkkinen, who was in the base control centre.

“This is ‘Snow Woman’. This is ‘Snow Woman’. All units return to base.”

What’s she talking about? I still haven’t had a chance to fight!

“’Snow Woman’. Tell me the location of the enemy!”

“P/O Anabuki Tomoko. With the exception of an emergency, you should not answer like that to anyone above the Squadron Commander.”

“Is this not an emergency!? Now where is the enemy-“

“The enemy have already withdrawn. Today’s battle is over.”

Flt Lt Häkkinen’s voice resounded, as cold as ice.

That night…

In the mess hall of the barracks…

All the members of the Suomus Independent Volunteer Squadron were gathered and staring idly at the ceiling. The Neuroi had only attacked the base with a melee weapon; it was a blessing in disguise. There were bullet holes all over and

the fuel tanker used by the base was done for - it would be no loss as it had almost filled its war potential.

Minor damage aside, there was one huge problem with the ambush.

Even with the 1st Squadron's hard fighting, the Neuroi had still managed to pass over the borders…They hadn't been able to prevent the Neuroi from bombing the nearby town Slussen, and now there was a flood of complaints from the townsfolk.

It wasn't hard to see that Tomoko was fuming; she didn't open her mouth once. Haruka, who was seated beside her, began to fidget uncomfortably. When the Neuroi came and attacked…I was so frightened I couldn't move.

She attempted to say something, but each time she was hindered by the harsh atmosphere of Tomoko, rendering her unable to speak at all. P/O Elma had returned from the control room.

"From tomorrow, it seems that we'll be deployed alongside the 1st Squadron. We'll do nothing more than offer the 1st Squadron support. Basically, we're their back up. We'll be the accompanying 'objects'…"

Tomoko's head dropped quickly.

"Pilot Officer Anabuki…, I'm sorry for today. I'm only cowardly…"

Katharine hit F/O Elma on the shoulder.

"It wasn't just F/O Elma…We're no good either. Today, we saw children who lived in the town and had lost the place that they called home. It's unforgivable to let the number of children in that situation rise. That's why, I'll do my best. Ain't that so, Ursula, P/O Beurling?"

Beurling murmured a "yes". Ursula also nodded in agreement.

"For that reason, please, Tomoko."

F/O Elma grabbed Tomoko's hand.

"Not only in training, please take control over our aerial battle too…Just as I

thought, as I don’t have any real combat experience, I can’t take control. And today, you saw me trembling…” Tomoko stood up.

“Oh!”

Everyone stirred, waiting to see what she had to say.

“Understood. I’ll take control.”

“With this we’ll have tremendous strength!”

Katharine jumped up. Haruka smoothed down her chest. Beurling glanced at Tomoko and smiled. Ursula closed the pages of the book she was reading. “If that’s been decided then, it’s a celebration! Good luck from tomorrow!”

Despite their trust in her, Tomoko spoke to the rest of the squad in a cold, disconnected tone.

“Well then, I’ll hand down orders.”

“Eh? Orders…?”

Everyone stared at Tomoko.

“I mean exactly as I say. For these past two weeks, I’ve kept a close eye on you all. And now I finally understand. You’re all useless!”

“U-Uh, I don’t think that might…”

“It’s alright. I’ll fight by myself. It’d honour me if you lot would pay close attention.”

Tomoko turned around and began to head towards her room.

“What the! Even though we went through such trouble to get motivated!”

Katharine shouted.

“Tomoko Shou-i…”

Haruka whimpered in a lonely voice as she stared at Tomoko’s back.

Tomoko got into her room and threw herself down, staring at the ceiling.

“Takeko…, it seems that the only one I can rely on is you. How can I be stuck with a load of powerless idiots? I can’t even have a decent discussion with them.”

Tomoko closed her eyes.

“Watch me, Takeko. I’ll take down all those who stand in my path. I’ll show you the power of one person. Even though you’ve been fortunate enough to be dispatched to Karlsland, I’m not going to give up. I’ll get my own war achievements.”

At the end of the day, each person is an individual unit. When you’re dead, and when you’re alive, you’re still an individual. Seeing as that’s the case, then you can take the challenge of winning and losing alone too.

Chapter 6 - Ace

The next morning.

A cold mist swept through the early morning air...

Tomoko was sitting on a chair in the warehouse, her eyes closed, her expression set in a look of pure concentration. A Striker unit was already equipped to her legs.

Her Ki-27... Tomoko's long-time companion, ever since the Fuso Sea Incident.

The magic engine was already finished pre-heating and running hot. Tomoko sat stock-still on the folding chair, in her miko flight uniform, grasping her katana in one hand.

"Tomoko, you look just like a samurai, wow!"

Katharine said, seated on a similar chair not too far off, also waiting for orders to sortie. Nearby, F/O Elma, Haruka, Beurling, and Ursula sat waiting as well.

An aura of harsh determination radiated from Tomoko, giving her the air of a master swordsman from medieval Fuso.

She would strike at the merest touch, so great was this determination.

"I wonder if P/O Anabuki was serious about what she said yesterday?"

F/O Elma said in a lonely voice to the group.

"Probably... She doesn't seem like the type that would say one thing and do another...

Haruka answered.

Was Tomoko serious when she said she'd fight alone? It was a lonely thought. Haruka put her hand into her pocket, and grasped the object there.

If I use this... I might be able to help her.

But... Haruka shook her head.

She could never show anyone how she looked when using it.

Especially the person she respected... the person she admired.

The happiness of that one night. I want to see how it ends. But, if Tomoko were to see me with this, I just know that she will leave me forever. After all, it's unsightly...

If only I never got this... Haruka thought, and raised her head.

"What's wrong, Haruka?"

Katharine was looking at her with a worried expression.

"N-Nothing, ma'am!"

Haruka blushed, and at the same moment... Tomoko's shoulder twitched almost imperceptibly.

The siren was wailing.

The speaker hanging from the ceiling began broadcasting an announcement in Suomish and Britannian.

"Air raid alert. Air raid alert. A Neuroi bomber formation numbering over sixty is advancing on this base. Fighter squadrons will intercept."

Tomoko sprang into action immediately, nearly charging out of the room.

Katharine, Beurling, and Ursula all stood and left the room as well. F/O lightly slapped her own cheeks nervously, and followed after them.

Haruka left the building and onto the airfield as well. She fired up the Sakae-1-1 magic engine to maximum, and began rising into the air.

The battlefield widened before her eyes.

It was the same sky she always flew in, nothing she could see had changed at all... and yet, something about it all was different.

Tomoko was the first off the runway.

Soon after, her Striker revved to max, and she shot into the sky.

The Ki-27, despite being an old model, lifted Tomoko into the air easily. Tomoko glanced behind her, and saw Mika Ahonen's 1st Squadron begin taking off one after the other. Even if her name was "aho", the precision of their movements left little doubt of her leadership. *Guess she wasn't just being dramatic when she saved me yesterday.*

The Messerscharf Strikers lived up to their reputation as some of Karlsland's best engineering, climbing into the air powerfully.

In just moments, the lead Witches of 1st Squadron had caught up to Tomoko, passing her steadily. There was a remarkable difference in engine power between the two Strikers.

"Excuse me for going on ahead."

Mika Ahonen's voice came over the radio.

Tomoko rolled her wings slightly from side to side in acknowledgment.

F/L Häkkinen's voice came from the radio next.

"The enemy formation is currently at point A-4, altitude 4000 meters, and remains on course. ETI six minutes at maximum speed."

Tomoko maintained her pace, flying behind Mika Ahonen and 1st Squadron. As the monotonous flight towards the intercept continued, Elma, then Katharine and the rest of the squadron caught up at last.

However, perhaps in respect of Tomoko's wishes, they kept a constant distance away from her.

Tomoko noticed, but ignored the rest of the squadron as just another feature of the landscape.

She concentrated on the advancing enemy instead.

She glanced at her altimeter-watch. Just over 4000 meters. Maintaining that altitude, and five minutes of routine flying later, she saw small dots far off in the distance.

One, two, three...

'Neuroi'.

More and more dots appeared in the sky.

Tomoko watched as 1st squadron climbed higher. Heading into their blind spot... they were most likely going to dive in from above to break up the enemy formation as an opening attack. It was the best way to deal with an enemy when outnumbered.

However, Tomoko continued with her head-on flight, fearless of the enemy's superior numbers. Her Ki-27's speed and diving ability was not well suited to the boom and zoom tactics the Messerscharfs were capable of.

Tomoko, and the Ki-27, had another way to fight.

The distance to the enemy formation closed steadily.

Tomoko's pulse raced.

As the distance closed, the silhouette of the enemy formation sharpened.

The Neuroi looked far more crude than the elegant form of the mechanized air infantry Witches. Even if both sides flew in the air, their outward appearance was completely different.

The small, squat spots were Ralloses, the same class of flyers that strafed the car Tomoko was driving the previous day. They numbered over thirty.

As for the long and narrow ones below them... medium Kefalas bombers. The same ones that bombed Slussen. Again, over thirty. In total, that made for over sixty in the formation. So far, the report was accurate.

Facing off against them, their own forces consisted of the twelve Witches of 1st Squadron, and the six from the Suomus Independent Volunteer Air Squadron. Eighteen Witches in all. They were at a disadvantage... but it wasn't hopeless.

Tomoko noticed 1st Squadron begin their attack. Having used the clouds as cover to great effect, Tomoko watched as they entered a steep dive into into the unprepared enemy formation.

"Not bad," she said to herself.

The Neuroi bomber formation and 1st Squadron met.

Boom! Babaam! Explosive shells from the 20mm cannons on the Messerscharfs rained down on the Neuroi from above. Several of the shells hit their targets, which burst into flames and began falling.

Nearly all of the ones that went down were Kefalas bombers.

Completely ignoring the escorting Rallos fighters, 1st Squadron's main target were the Kefalases. In terms of overall strategy, it was the best thing to do in the situation.

The enemy formation was scattered and in disarray from the surprise attack. Tomoko headed directly into the midst of the fighting, and started her own attack.

Tomoko maneuvered onto the tail of a flight of four Raloses banking towards the Messerscharfs. The Neuroi tactics were simple, and they single-mindedly followed the Messerscharfs. Tomoko moved into position undetected.

"Those Messers have a speed advantage... Those Neuroi would never catch up to them anyway."

Tomoko swung the 7.7 mm machine gun on her back into her hands. She pulled the cocking lever, loading the first round into the chamber. Ahead of her, the enemy weaved back and forth hopelessly after the quicker 1st Squadron, losing what little airspeed they had.

Tomoko adroitly placed her sights over the first Rallos, and pulled the trigger.

Tatatatan! The gun rattled against her shoulder, as a stream of 7.7 mm rounds pounded into the stabilizing tailplane of the Rallos. The elevator on the stabilizer shuddered and broke, flying off into the wind. That Rallos tipped forward, and began drifting to the ground below. The 7.7 mm was weak, but it had no problems destroying the weak spots on the delicate equipment.

The Ki-27 moved like another part of Tomoko's body, pointing her directly at the next Rallos.

With a deft twist of her body, Tomoko took aim at the engine of the moving Rallos.

One burst.

Fragments splintered off of the nose of the Rallos. As smoke started pouring from the hole, that Rallos went down in an uncontrolled dive.

At last, the remaining two Ralloses began evasive maneuvers.

However, nothing in the world could escape from a Ki-27 hard on their tail.

Tomoko wiped out the remaining two Neuroi at nearly the same time.

As she turned towards her next target, she saw the Messerscharfs gaining altitude for another attack.

Thanks to Tomoko, they now had a chance to climb, unmolested by the enemy fighters.

Below them, the Kefalas formation was still flying in an unwavering line. The Suomish Witches most probably planning on swooping down on them again soon.

Tomoko turned her head towards her radio, and shouted.

"Flight Lieutenant Ahonen! Don't mind the Ralloses, I'll handle them!"

"Ah, thank you," Ahonen replied, in a slightly flustered manner.

"Now we're even for yesterday."

Tomoko glanced behind herself quickly, and spied six new Ralloses heading towards her.

After appearing out of nowhere and shooting down four Ralloses in no seconds, Tomoko supposed that the Neuroi found her to be a greater threat than the Messerscharfs.

"Truly an honor."

With a slight smile on her face, Tomoko dove away from the bombers. Her plan was to pull as many of the Ralloses away from 1st squadron as possible.

At that moment, F/O Elma's voice came in over the radio.

"P/O Anabuki! Are you alright!? Wh-whao, you've got six of them on your tail!"

Haruka chimed in.

"I-I'm coming into range now! Just hold on for a bit longer, ma'am!"

Tomoko shouted in reply.

"Stay away! I'll be fine! Just go and get those other Ralloses away from 1st Squadron any way you can! You don't need to help me!"

"B-But..."

With six fighters hot on her tail, Tomokopulled hard into a sharp inward turn. The six fighters behind her attempted to copy the exacting maneuver.

As a result, the six Ralloses lost speed rapidly, barely gliding along at their stall speed.

Tomoko fired her machine gun, aiming at the weak spots on the engines. One by one, the Ralloses were hit and fell.

Level dogfighting... The specialty of the Ki-27, and it showed as the fight continued.

However, after the third Rallos spun out of control and went down, the machine gun went dry. Slinging the empty gun behind her back, Tomoko swiftly drew her katana from its sheath. The Hizen Osafune glowed bright as Tomoko's magic power was absorbed into the blade.

Tomoko adroitly cut through the wings of the last three enemies on her tail, as calmly as if she testing a cut on a target post.

Off balance, the three Ralloses fell to the ground in an arc, spinning in tight circles.

Tomoko checked on 1st Squadron's progress with the Kefalas formation. The Witches were launching a steady stream of attacks on the bombers. Thanks to Tomoko bringing down the number of Ralloses, 1st Squadron was able to attack with impunity. Without the support of the fighters, the bombers were nothing more than simple targets.

Boom, boom! Another Kefalas exploded in flames, and fell to the ground.

As Tomoko watched, the heavily damaged Kefalases that were still in the air dropped several large objects from their underbelly.

Bombs.

The only thing below them was miles of snow-filled forests.

As soon as the last bombs fell, the Kefalases began banking away.

F/L Häkkinen's came in over the intercom.

"All mechanized air infantry witches, good work. The enemy has abandoned the bombing run. The interception was a success."

Once the interception squadrons were within visual distance to Kauhava Air Force Base, Tomoko did ten loop-the-loops.

The sign for 'ten shot down'.

Below, the technicians and base sentries had assembled and cheered at the sign. The witches of 1st Squadron, who had returned earlier, were also waiting nearby.

Tomoko landed to a roar of applause.

"You had those damn Neuroi running away with their tail between their legs!"

"That was amazing! Ten down in one sortie!"

"A double ace here at Kauhava!"

Tomoko waved at the troops cheering for her. As the cheers went on, F/L Mika Ahonen of 1st Squadron walked up to Tomoko's side, and suddenly hugged her.

"My apologies for ever calling you useless. Because of you, we were able to concentrate on attacking those bombers. You have my thanks."

Beaming with pride, Tomoko nodded.

Further away, another group watched the exulted crowd around Tomoko. It was F/O Elma, Haruka, and the others, who had contributed nothing to the battle.

They watched Tomoko blankly, as the members of the base surrounded her.

"She told us not to do anything, so I just watched, but is that what I should've done?" Katharine said quietly.

"I wonder."

Haruka replied.

Beurling simply stood, scratching one cheek, seemingly lost in her own thoughts.

F/L Elma fidgeted about nervously, and began pacing back and forth.

"F/L Elma, what's the matter?"

"Oh, well... I want to say congratulations to P/O Anabuki, but I was wondering if I'd be getting in the way if I go now..."

"My, you really are such a thoughtful person," Katharine said.

As the Neuroi attacks were pushed back time and again by the stalwart mechanized air infantry squadrons, Kauhava AFB soon became a prime target for the enemy, with attacks coming every two or three days.

Numbers as high as the first day were rarely seen, and smaller bomber formations of about forty Neuroi flyers became the standard.

Each time the attacks came, the girls of Kauhava AFB would fly to meet the attack, and fend it off.

Among the defenders, Tomoko's performance was stellar, and her score made up over 40% of the enemy fighters shot down.

However, as her own victory count increased higher and higher, the other members of the Suomus Independent Volunteer Air Squadron sunk ever deeper into the gutter.

Every time the SIVAS attempted to join in the fighting, Tomoko would refuse

their aid vehemently. Even in the rare cases where an enemy got on her tail, she would merely say things along the line of "I don't need any help, I'll be fine. Don't get in my way."

True to her words, Tomoko was never showered in enemy rounds... but even with the squadron assertively offering their help. Tomoko merely looked at them icily each time it happened.

Before long, the only contact Tomoko had with the rest of the squadron were simple greetings on the few occasions they chanced on each other in the barracks.

Two weeks after the first attack... December was half gone. With a blizzard already blowing early in the morning, the analysts predicted that there would be no Neuroi bombing runs.

In other words, the first day off for the Witches in a long time.

Both 1st Squadron and the SIVAS were removed from standby, and given the chance to refresh their exhausted bodies after the consecutive sorties of the previous few weeks.

Tomoko found herself heading towards a facility that seemed out of place on an air force base... a sauna.

Constructed next to the barracks, the solidly built brick sauna was one of the favorite places to relax for the personnel working on base.

Heated rocks on stoves beside wooden boards for sitting, and pouring water over oneself after working up a sweat. That was a common type of sauna in northern Europe.

Tomoko was sitting on the boards, with only a single towel placed on her lap. Beads of sweat formed on her smooth skin, sliding down as they formed larger drops. Her wet, black hair clung to her body. The pale creaminess of her skin contrasted starkly with the black hair, like a well-made painting.

The sound of the door openingmade Tomoko turn around.

Standing at the doorway nervously was Haruka, wrapped in a towel.

"Um... do you mind if I join you?"

She asked, and Tomoko nodded.

"Does it even matter if I say yes or no? Come in."

Haruka stepped quickly over to Tomoko's side with a pitter patter of her small feet, and sat down.

The smaller girl glanced nervously at Tomoko sitting beside her, blushed, then lowered her gaze shyly.

"What is it?"

"Oh, u-um! Congratulations on shooting down forty Neuroi!"

"Thank you."

"I've heard that in this Neuroi war, only five other mechanized air infantrymen have shot down over Neuroi. Shou-i, you're really amazing. I'm as happy as if I had done it myself."

Haruka lowered her gaze again.

"Um... Shou-i Anabuki. There's something I'd like to ask for."

"What is it?"

"Well... could you make up with everyone else? P/O Katharine, and P/O Beurling, and Sgt. Ursula... they've all seen the error of their ways. We're all training up our skills seriously with everything we've got now. So that, maybe, we could actually be able to help...?"

"....."

"Sgt. Ursula has been developing new equipment this entire time too. She said that she's thought of some promising new designs. Once she's done, could you maybe review it for the higher-ups?"

"....."

Tomoko did not answer. A troubled look passed briefly across Haruka's face, but she continued.

"None of us are as skilled as you, Shou-i... well, maybe except P/O Beurling. But anyway, even though we're all weak, when we work together, we thought that maybe we could help you at least a bit. T-Teamwork, you know. So, um... if you could just work together with us as well..."

"I'm fine by myself."

Tomoko stood up.

"Shou-i Tomoko."

"It's... easier for me to fight alone. I'm sick and tired of being held back."

"But aren't we supposed to be a team!?"

Haruka shouted out loudly.

"I didn't come to Suomus to play house and make friends. I came here to fight."

With that final parting shot, Tomoko left the sauna room.

As she wiped her body off in the dressing room, she felt someone else enter the room, and stop near the wall.

"Who is it?"

Tomoko turned around. It was Beurling.

"What do you want?"

In reply, Beurling silently waved a hand through her silver hair, then said in her usual flat tone.

"Got a minute? We need to talk."

Beurling led Tomoko to the hangar, to where the squadron's Strikers were lined up in orderly rows.

"So? What did you want to talk about?"

Beurling did not reply.

Instead, she looked down at her own beloved Hurricane. She reached out and brushed one hand along its side, seemingly lost in thought.

"If you've got nothing to say, I'm leaving."

As Tomoko prepared to leave, Beurling finally answered.

"I was in Ostmark before."

Huh? Tomoko stared in puzzlement.

Ostmark was a country that was situated between Karlsland and the Neuroi. The reason it ‘was’ situated, is because around half a year ago, it was annihilated by the Neuroi invasion. These days it’s nothing more than a barren and desolate land - dominated by the Neuroi’s miasma.

Why had she been in Ostmark?

Beurling conducted herself in a manner which was as overbearing as ever, disregarding Tomoko’s puzzled facial expression and continuing her story.

“A short while before the Neuroi came to attack; my unit were dispatched to Ostmark… We were a wing dedicated to the observation of international Neuroi. We were carrying out routine work on the primary Neuroi from the Great War. When our half a year term of office had finished, we would probably return home to our country.”

Beurling continued her story with an air of indifference about her.

“Around then, I had someone who was something of a rival. She and I would compete to be the first and second most skilled in the unit; we’d have many sham battles, competing with skill. She was an unreasonable girl. She assumed that it was fine to put faith in your own skill, but even so, there would always be

someone who could surpass you. She's to blame for the some of the times I've been mad here, too. Things like... quarrelling all the time. Anyway... back to the time when the Neuroi came to attack… We thought it was time to reach a conclusion. Which one will surpass the other? It was simple. We'd decided that the one who could shoot down more Neuroi would be superior. Every day, we would make an effort to compete in sorties. The Neuroi seemed to attack with an infinite number – the enemy had nothing to worry about. It was a lost battle, we would retreat one after another, yet our fighting spirit was strong."

"…"

"We were as extremely unreasonable as each other. Our shoot down count was just about the same. Then… something happened. I went out on my own, pursuing the enemy to try and get one up on her. Suddenly I was surrounded by 10 enemy aircraft. It was a stalemate. There were 3 enemy aircraft to my back, I was receiving fire simultaneously. It was around that time…"

Beurling's tone of voice dropped considerably.

"She threw herself into the line of fire. She received blows from large calibre machineguns, yet she was using her magic shield, which was degenerating slowly. Immediately after that, my ally provided covering fire, advancing against the enemy, and as the enemy began to back off... I was saved. It came at a price. As her body dropped next to me, her breathing had already ceased."

Tomoko was at a loss for words.

Who would have thought that someone who as cranky as Beurling would have a past like this?

"This Hurricane was the piece of equipment that she used."

Beurling murmured whilst she stroked her beloved machine.

"….So, is that all you want to say? Did you drag me all the way to here just so that I could hear your old story?"

Tomoko responded, biting down onto her lip.

Beurling shook her head.

“I came to Suomus to die.”

Tomoko felt as if all the blood had rushed from her face.

That time when Tomoko threatened her with her sword… She had said "kill me." That had been the real deal.

“It was my fault that she was killed… and now I even equip her striker unit. I thought that death was my only atonement.”

“It’s absurd to die on your own accord.”

“Ah. That’s right. But… back then… when I saw the orphanage that had been bombed in the town, I began to change my mind. Before I die, I want to do whatever I can to stop the amount of people left with nowhere else to go from increasing.”

“…”

“Say, Tomoko.”

It was the first time Beurling had called her by her name.

“….What”

“The real enemy isn’t the Laros. There’s no real meaning behind the number of them that are dispatched.”

“Well then, what is our real enemy?”

“The bomber formations. If we can take them down, it’d shut the Neuroi up. The Neuroi will probably… dispatch a large bomber formation. If a mid sized formation has no effect, then there are no doubts about it. The most important thing when taking down a large bomber unit ‘Co-operation’. The ability of an individual will be rendered useless against them.”

Beurling’s words made Tomoko feel re-assured and confident that she wouldn’t just have to rely on the strength of those with actual combat experience there.

She still shook her head.

“Your rival may have died…, but my rival still lives. And so, I’m waiting until the day when I can surpass her. I’ve still not had the chance to succeed her… ”

“Tomoko.”

“There is no reason for me to lose to her. I can’t lose to her, that’s all I thought up until now - and that is why I continue to fly. That is why…”

Beurling seemed to be lost in thought for a while.

"Is that so," she murmured in a lonely tone, before leaving the aircraft hangar. Tomoko stood motionlessly in the hangar - absolutely still.

Outside, the blizzard continued to rage on.

Chapter 7 - Showdown! Diomedea!

Tomoko's shoot-down count had begun to rise normally. It wasn't long before Christmas arrived.

"Pilot Officer Anabuki. Flight Lieutenant Häkkinen would like to see you in the command room."

Before noon…Tomoko, who was returning to base after finishing aerial patrol, had been informed of the arrival of an officer. It was unusual for her to be called all the way out to the command centre.

As she rushed off, wondering why she'd been called out, she noticed someone other than F/L Häkkinen – someone with a face that invoked nostalgia.

It wasn't someone that she knew, however. His face was one that was uncommon in a place like Suomus - the reason being that it was oriental.

F/L Häkkinen introduced her to the middle aged man: "A guest from your country, Pilot Officer."

The man beamed at Tomoko.

"Wing Commander Sakuma, a military attaché."

Tomoko saluted in a hurry. He wasn't in uniform, so she hadn't known he was with the military.

"Please excuse me. I'm currently on civil service related business."

It seems like this man is a well-informed officer. What on earth could someone like that possibly want with me?

"You've done a great deal of good work. I'm very proud. Congratulations on your 50th shoot down. Currently, you are the top ace of Fuso's European detachment."

Tomoko bowed out of respect.

Surely he didn’t come all this way just to give me a pep talk?

Just as she thought it odd that a military attaché would use his free time to pay her a visit, the following words that came from his mouth shocked her thoroughly.

“Well then, we can’t afford an ace like that to go without proper recognition, can we? On this occasion, we’ve decided to give you the appropriate decoration. You will be awarded the fourth class Order of the Golden Kite. It is truly an honour, Pilot Officer.”

The Order of the Golden Kite is an award that carries a lot of honour along with it. It is even said by the Air Marshal you can’t receive it unless you demonstrate distinguished war accomplishments. It is the ultimate verification of one’s own potential.

“T-Thank you very much!” Said Tomoko, bowing once more with her utmost thanks.

Happiness was bubbling inside her.

“It’s likely that you will receive official directions from the higher officers shortly. The awarding ceremony is scheduled to take place in Paris. I’ve called for officers and officials alike. It’ll be a splendid party. I hope you’ll look forward to it.”

She was so overjoyed she was practically shaking.

Afterwards, she asked him briefly about current affairs in Fuso; and the war situation in Karlsland.

Looking at the war situation in Karlsland on a whole, it seemed that no matter how well the Karlsland detatchment were doing, nothing was changing for the better.

I wonder if Takeko is doing well?

Tomoko was filled with anxiety.

“How is the squad in Karlsland keeping up?”

“I hear that they’re still yet to report any victims.”

Tomoko was relieved. For now, it seemed like Takeko was safe.

Despite her relief, there was something that she was just itching to ask. There was no doubt that a high-ranking officer would know plenty of detailed information regarding the military.

“Wing Commander Sakuma, Sir. I’ve got something I would like to inquire about.”

“Go ahead.”

“Who was the one who made the decision to have me sent to Suomus?”

Wing Commander Sakuma was taken aback with surprise.

“You don’t know?”

“No.”

“It was your colleague, Pilot Officer Katou.”

The response drained all colour from her face.

“Takeko did?”

“Yes. We were in the middle of selecting the soldiers that would be sent to Karlsland. There was no doubt that we were going to be sending you off in the detachment. However, Pilot Officer Katou came along to the selection committee meeting one day. She had a request for us – quite simply that we shouldn’t send you to Karlsland.”

“Why would she…why…?”

Wing Commander Sakuma flinched at Tomoko’s growing fury.

“Well…I didn’t hear it from her firsthand, so I don’t know the details myself... but…she suggested that you tended to fall flat during fierce battle. However,

looking at your military records and service history that doesn't seemed to be a problem, so I myself, am a little confused as to why she would say something like that. In the end, the most senior officer present decided that you would be sent to Suomus instead - based on her insistence. It's nothing to be disheartened by, given your military achievements."

Tomoko was appalled.

The one that decided that I would get sent to Suomus was…Takeko.

Why? Tomoko whispered under her breath.

Even though Takeko and I could have been fighting together as rivals…

We could have been competing together for military achievements…

Tomoko shuffled back to her own room and let her body drop onto her bed. She knew she had to write up a report for the aerial patrol she was on earlier, but her hand wouldn't budge.

Just…why?

If I think back…Takeko had been a little odd. I guess she was jealous of my military prowess after all. Of course! That's why she sent me to Suomus – a place where it would be impossible to achieve military greatness. Even though we were such good friends, I'm just alone now.

Just as Tomoko's thoughts slipped further and further into depression, the siren roared throughout the base.

"Air raid warning! Air raid warning!"

It's the Neuroi.

The enemy sure knows how to beat me when I'm down.

Tomoko stood up, biting firmly on her lip.

As she ascended into the sky, she could hear an announcement from F/L Hakkinen.

“The Neuroi bomber formation of 20 units is currently at co-ordinates B-3 with an altitude of 5,000 metres and rising. Be careful. Today’s Neuroi is unlike anything we’ve faced before.”

She spoke in her usual cold tone. However, Tomoko was off with the fairies and paid the warning no heed. She felt her body moving automatically to the assigned co-ordinates, and the correct altitude.

The 1st squadron, who by now would usually be attempting to take the enemy down - were instead circling in the air space above the enemy.

What on earth were they doing that for?

The reason hit Tomoko in the face in an instant.

The Laros were circling around a much bigger beast…

It wasn’t the usual Kefalas.

The silhouette was three times as big.

Despite being one single unit, it had an overwhelming presence.

“This is ‘Snow Woman’ to fighter squadron. The large Neuroi bombing unit approaching is a new model called Diomedia! It’s a monster that took down an entire naval aviation unit in Karlsland! It’s equipped with a weapon that shoots hedgehog-like spikes. Coming close to it without careful thought would be dangerous!”

Upon closer inspection, it stood out from the Kefalas in relief.

The shape of the four engines it was towing along resembled that of a huge aerial fortification. It was definitely very unusual looking. The wings that extended horizontally from the body gave off an aura of ill fate. Both the fuselage and the wings were thick, and powerful. It was very likely to be suitably

fortified, and bombproof.

Understandably, it seemed even F/L Mika Ahonen’s experienced 1st squadron had no idea how they should go about attacking the thing. They drew close to it, shot at it with their machine guns, then made evasive maneuvers.

Tomoko focused her courage.

It was scary.

She had a gut feeling that she couldn’t win.

That didn't stop her from beginning her approach.

Elma yelled out over the wireless: “P/O Anabuki! It’s too dangerous – don’t get any closer!”

Tomoko didn’t stop her charge.

Next was Katharine's protest: “P/O! Don’t go any closer! That thing’s deadly!”

And finally she heard Haruka’s voice: “P/O! Please stop! Stop and think about what you’re doing!”

She didn’t listen, and steadily drew closer.

The Diomedia began to fire defensively from the infinite number of turrets attached to its huge body. Blue metal bullets that looked like ice-pops flew relentlessly in Tomoko’s direction.

F/L Hakkinen’s previous words were burned into her mind:

It took down a Naval Aviation unit in Karlsland huh? That means Takeko couldn’t defeat it. To put it simply, if I can take down this thing, then I’ll be one better than Takeko. That would be better than any award – better than getting praise from the people of this country.

Watch and learn, Takeko. Tomoko whispered to herself.

I’ll prove to you that you will never be better than me!

The distance between them was now 200 metres.

The Diomedia's defensive turrets began to hit at Tomoko.

If this is all it's going to do, then I can probably survive with a simple magic shield.

She spread around the figure of the large bombing squadron, keeping it in her sights all the while. She began firing at it with her 7.7mm machine gun.

It's difficult to get that bulk out in the open.

Pa! Pa! Pa! The bullets dissipated across the surface of the Diomedia's fuselage like fireworks but…it had as much impact as a small rock tumbling off a mountain.

It seems to be completely fortified against bullets and bombs. I'll never take it down with just a 7.7mm machine gun!

"Get down already!"

Tomoko shouted at the top of her voice as she continued to pull on the trigger. The bullets just continued to ricochet off.

The relative distance between them was now only 100 metres.

I can't get out of its line of sight…it looks like my magic shield is reaching its limit.

"Ah!"

In an instant her engine was hit. Smoke was pouring from her beloved Fuso made machine. She felt her body begin to fall down with rapid velocity.

If I don't slow down soon I'm in big trouble!

Tomoko desperately tried with all her might to get out of the line of fire…but it was too late.

"Ugh!"

A bullet hit her in the arm. Next she felt excruciating pain in her leg.

Just as she thought there was no hope left…She could vaguely make out a brown shape fall down from above, spreading itself over her.

“Eh?”

The bullets that should have been hitting Tomoko were now hitting that shape instead.

“Beurling!”

Tomoko was gobsmacked. She had become Tomoko’s shield…taking all the fire by herself... with a pained look on her face, was P/O Beurling.

“What on earth are you doing? Let go!”

Beurling didn’t let go. Her shield was beginning to reach its limit from the battering…her body was dented with bullet fire, and Tomoko could hear the sound of padding as her shield started losing power.

“Do you have a death wish or something!?”

Even still, Beurling would not separate from Tomoko. As she continued to hold Tomoko in safety, she unsteadily began to fly closer to ground level.

Just when they were out of the range of the Diomedia… Tomoko felt a burst of strength from Beurling’s body. She collapsed, and began to glide straight towards the floor.

“Beurling!”

Tomoko screamed. She made an effort to chase after her, but her body wouldn’t do what she wanted out of sheer pain.

Her vision blackened out…and she lost consciousness.

When she came to, Tomoko was resting in a bed in the base’s medical bay. Next to her, F/O Elma, Katharine and Haruka were peering down at her with great

concern.

“You’ve finally regained consciousness.” Katharine whispered.

“Thank goodness…you’ve been out for an entire day.” P/O Elma informed Tomoko.

As Tomoko whispered, “... Where am I?” Elma responded, telling her that she was in Kauhava’s medical bay.

She made a futile attempt to move her body, but agonising pain shot through her as soon as she tried.

“Ahhh! You really should rest!”P/O Elma suggested.

“But Beurling…Beurling is…”As Tomoko continued to mumble to herself, Katharine made a movement with her lips.

“Well um, about that…that is…”

Haruka and Ursula looked towards P/O Elma with pleading eyes.

She hesitated for a while, and then bit down on her lip. Eventually, she mustered up some courage and raised her head.

“…She took fire all over her body and her magic shield subsequently failed. And then-”

Tomoko’s skin became pale.

“No way…”

Before then, she’d been so scared that she couldn’t speak. After shivering for a while, Tomoko struggled to muster up the strength to squeeze out a few words.

“…Why? Why would she do that for my sake? Even though all I ever did was say horrible things to her…”

Elma continued her sentence this time in a more apologetic tone: “P/O Beurling said that P/O Anabuki is a very important person to this squad…that’s why…”

“That’s why she said she’d use herself as a shield!? What kind of reason is that!”

P/O Elma shook her head. Tomoko was completely inconsolable.

“Please just relax and let your wounds heal. Don’t worry about anything else.”

“But…but…without me and Beurling…”

“I-It’s totally fine!”Katharine nodded with an optimistic smile.

“Next time we’ll try out that new thing that Ursula made! Uh, what was that again, anyway…? Ursula?”

“Air-to-air rocket.”Ursula responded in a quiet voice.

“Yes! That’s it! That rocket! If we hit it with one of those, it’ll go down no matter how big it is…”

Tomoko was apprehensive.

A rocket, huh? You’d probably have no choice but to be fairly close to hit it with a rocket.

P/O Elma grabbed Tomoko’s hand.

“…P/O Elma.”

“Things will definitely work out! We’ll find a way. So please, just relax and let your wounds heal up.”

Haruka piled her hand on top of Elma’s.

“D-Don’t worry! The Neuroi definitely won’t come anywhere near here!”

Everyone hurriedly lowered their heads at Tomoko: “P/O Anabuki Tomoko, thank you.”

Tomoko stared at her bandaged arm.

I…I wonder if everyone will forgive me for what I’ve done?

…I’ve been nothing but selfish. I get the feeling that I’ve been far too enforcing.

That night… Just as Tomoko was about to succumb to tiredness after everyone had left, there was a knock at the door. As there was no answer, the door creaked open.

It was F/L Häkkinen.

“Flight Lieutenant.”

As she spoke, she was handed a single sheet of paper.

“…And this is?”

“It’s a leave order.”

“…A leave order?”

“Exactly. I received word from Wing Commander Sakuma that we couldn't possibly have a soon to be decorated ace die….”

“….”

“A ship has been called for - it’s due to arrive tomorrow. you should take it as far as Brest Naval Base in Gallia.”

After F/L Häkkinen had left, Tomoko lowered her face.

“We could’t possibly have you die…”

F/L Häkkinen’s words echoed in her mind.

They reminded her of the heavy burden she was carrying... Beurling's death.

Lowering her voice, she began to sob quietly.

Beurling’s death was…my fault. 'It’s all because I rushed in to get my glorious military victory…'All because I was pursuing the title of ‘ace’…'I killed an important comrade.

No, I killed a person who acknowledged me as a comrade.

I shouldn’t think of this as just another burden. 'But it looks like it’s become my scapegoat.

“Why did you have to protect me... Someone like me who is only interested in my shoot down count…”

Tomoko wept until morning.

The following morning…

Wing Commander Sakuma arrived in the medical bay, followed by a subordinate officer. This time was different – he was clothed in his Fuso Imperial Army uniform.

“Today I’m here to give you formal orders. Pilot Officer Anabuki Tomoko of the Fuso Imperial Army and the Suomus Independent Volunteer Air Squadron, I order you to return home.”

After that, he smiled broadly.

“You did a fine job. You’ll surely be greeted with enthusiasm from the people of Fuso as soon as you return.”

Tomoko lay down on the stretcher that had been prepared for her, and was wheeled outside. She looked out at the place she had been living for the past two months.

The tattered warehouse…

It’d taken a smattering of machine gun fire during the first air raid, and as such the wall had been left scored with bullet marks.

I used to wonder why they’d left the building in such a disastrous state… but as I’m passing by it on my way home, I can’t help but feel strangely nostalgic…and lonely.

“Where is the rest of the squad?”She asked the reserve officer who was beside her.

“Ah, they’re ready and waiting to go on a sortie.”They answered.

My war may have ended abruptly… but for them it still rages on. I wonder if they’ll be all right?

She began to feel worrisome feelings welling up insider her again.

But…perhaps I don’t even have a right to be worried about them anymore. 'I didn’t co-operate with them not even one single time. 'I called them hopeless, good-for-nothing nuisances… and completely disregarded them.

Just as Tomoko was about to get in the car that would drive her away from the base…

The siren began to sound.

It wasn’t long before F/L Häkkinen’s voice echoed from the speakers near the airfield.

“Air raid warning! Air raid warning!”

Wing Commander Sakuma’s subordinate, who had been pushing the stretcher up until now, tutted.

“And we’d just arrived! It would have been better if they hadn’t shown up right at this moment…”

Tomoko pursed her lips.

They just don’t give up…

“The approaching enemy is the exact same Neuroi bomber formation we saw a few days ago! Its altitude is 4,000 metres! It’s in the middle of preparing for an attack on the base!”

Tomoko bit her lips.

They really have come for us…

She could see witches flying up into the sky from the airfield one by one.

The smart looking units that were gradually propelling them upwards were the Messerscharf Striker units of the 1st squadron.

That tubby looking unit is Katharine’s Buffalo. That waddling flight is something I’m very familiar with.

That small girl next to her looks like Ursula. She’s clutching a large tube with both hands. I wonder if that’s this so called ‘rocket’?

The white unit that just took off was Haruka’s A6M3 Model 22. Hey, if you don’t look ahead of you whilst you fly you’ll get separated from the rest of the squad!

P/O Elma was the last one to take off. Even though you’re the squad leader? What are they supposed to do without you! 'Look, the G50 doesn't have a lot of acceleration power so you really ought to have taken off sooner…

It was as shaky as start as ever. Tomoko stared up at the Suomus Independent Volunteer Air Squadron.

A bunch of ‘misfits’ thrown out from their own countries… my friends.

My friends, who have nowhere but here to call home.

My friends that I’ve been nothing but a nuisance to.

My friends… that said ‘thank you’ to me…

I…I might have just lost those friends.

It’s not a contest. It’s co-operation. 'If I can co-operate…Then we can become truly good friends. Then I can…

Just like Beurling…

They told me I could count on them.

“B-But…” Tomoko muttered.

“There’s no way I can count on you lot to do this alone!”

“Eh?” The officer who was holding the stretcher mumbled to himself in confusion at her outburst.

Tomoko felt her body awaken, and she leapt from the stretcher. She grabbed her furoshiki wrapped katana from the officer who had been her chaperone.

“W-Wait! Pilot Officer! What are you doing!”

Tomoko ignored him and began to walk away.

My leg hurts. My arm hurts. 'But…that won’t stop me from continuing.

No, it won’t stop me from flying!

Tomoko forcibly started to run, hobbling awkwardly on one leg. Wing Commander Sakuma began to give chase.

“Oi! Pilot Officer, where do you think you’re going!”

“I’m going to where my friends are!”

“Now now, what do you think you can do with injuries like that? You were issued an order of leave!”

“Well then, I refuse to follow that order.”

“What do you mean you refuse!? It’s an order, you can’t refuse!!”

Wing Commander Sakuma drew closer, until Tomoko pointed her katana close to his nose.

“I’m sorry. This means I won’t be accepting that award.”

As she burst into the aircraft hanger, the maintenance crew looked at her with wide eyes.

“P/O Anabuki!? We thought you’d returned to F-“

“Just get my Ki-27 ready, hurry!”

Threatened by Tomoko’s demand, the maintenance crew gathered Tomoko’s recently repaired Ki-27.

They equipped it onto Tomoko’s legs as she rested on a chair. Tomoko felt her legs get sucked into the Ki-27.

They were soon engulfed in the glowing blue light of her magic field.

“Are you sure you can fly with those injuries?”One of the maintenance crew asked, looking at her bandaged arms and legs.

“It’s not a matter or can or can’t. I will fly.”Tomoko shouted.

As she took off from the airfield, all of her magical power pumped into the Ki-27’s magic engine. The engine roared, and Tomoko sprung off the airfield and into the sky.

“Ugh!”Her body rose up to the sky in the midst of the engine’s roar.

“I can’t believe an old thing like that can ascend so well.”A maintenance crew member murmured - watching the sheer power of the Ki-27’s ascent.

“It’s probably because of her fighting spirit. The magic engine moves with magical power – right now she’s got that in bucket loads.”

The maintenance crew watched as Tomoko’s figure got smaller and smaller, waving their hats at her disappearing shape.

“Take down the Neuroi, ace!”

It was the same huge Diomedia that had come a few days ago. Quite frankly, the members of the Suomus Independent Volunteer Air Squadron were shitting themselves as they stood in front of it.

When you look at it up close like this…this thing is huge.

It really is huge.

How is it even possible to have something this huge?

With its wings extended, it was about the size of an entire school’s grounds.

The massive four engine bulk was being pushed forwards by a gargantuan propeller - which was rotating with a horrible sound similar to a car revving up.

The grubby grey paintjob made it look like some kind of ferocious whale.

“Somehow… it’s like Moby-Dick.”P/O Elma murmured. "Somehow... It's like Moby-Dick."

All the member of the ‘misfits squadron’ were in range of the huge bombing formation, staring at it. On the opposite side of the Diomedia, the 1st squadron were doing the same thing, surrounding it at a distance.

The Laros who were guarding the Diomedia didn’t even come close to begin attacking. They were focused on staying by the huge figure instead.

If they could get in closer, they could sweep in…. But there was no window for opportunity with those Laros surrounding it.

“So, it’s like we’re Captain Ahab about to grapple with Moby-Dick, huh?”Katharine said with a touch of self-derision.

“Wasn’t it Captain Ahab who ended up dying in the end?”Haruka’s words did nothing to brighten the mood.

“Don’t go and say something scary like that!”

“But… is there really a way we can take that thing down without dying?”

They all stood in collective silence.

“Ursula, how’s the preparation for the rocket?”P/O Elma asked Ursula.

Ursula’s reply was short: “OK.”

In her hands she held two cylinders. Inside were air-to-air rockets that Ursula had developed herself. The weight of the explosives was about 20 kilograms.

“Can we shoot it at the same range as a machine gun?”

Ursula shook her head: “Impossible.”

P/O Elma let out a sigh.

“We’re not going to accomplish anything standing around like this… why don’t we at least try and launch some kind of assault?”

As soon as they got closer… the Laros reacted. The Suomus Misfits Squadron drew back as quick as a fly being swatted away by a cow’s tail.

It was impossible for them to get close.

It was the same for the 1st squadron. They would draw close, before being pelted with defensive fire from the Laros and would then have to make evasive maneuvers.

P/O Elma seemed to have reached a resolution. “Now that it’s come to this…”

“I wonder if we can at least do a body-count on the enemy…”

“What’re you talkin’ about!?”

“If things carry on like this Slussen will get bombed again… We’re witches. We’ve got to protect everyone. That’s why…”

After speaking, P/O began to move gradually closer towards the enemy.

“You shouldn’t go alone, P/O Elma!” Haruka added.

“Now you wait here! You’ll get fried!” Katharine shouted.

Suddenly…The voice of someone shouting could be heard over the wireless.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!? Just stop trying to do a body count already!”

“Tomoko!”

“P/O Anabuki!”

She appeared from a gap within the clouds - her striker unit glowing with a magnificent white light. Tomoko surged in front of the members of the Suomus Misfits Squadron, both her hands outstretched.

“Pilot Officer…”Haruka had already started weeping.

“Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be sleeping in the medical b-“

None of them knew that Tomoko had been issued an order of leave. Right now, there was no time to explain anything.

“I couldn’t possibly leave this for you to do alone now, could I?”

“But…you’re injured…”

“The wounds don’t mean anything!” Tomoko shouted.

“I’m an ace. An ace can’t do anything if they’re asleep – can they?”

“Tomoko…” Katharine said. She grabbed her and hugged her from behind.

“You really are the best ace!”Having heavy Katherine hugging her, Tomoko lost balance and the two of them began spinning through the air.

“Why don’t we save the praise for later? Anyway, just follow my instructions.”

Tomoko called for the leader of the 1st squadron, Mika Ahonen, on the wireless.

“What is it? Shouldn’t you be resting in bed because of injury?”

“I’d like you to do me a favour. Please distract the Laros.”

“What are you planning to do about that damned Diomedia?”

“Leave that to ‘us.’”

After a brief while, she heard Mika Ahonen say ‘roger’.

“Follow me. I’ve got a strategy.”Tomoko told her comrades, who were lined up

in front of her.

“So this is your idea of ‘tactics’ huh?”

“I can’t do anything about it! You’re the one with the toughest striker unit!”

Katharine was making a fuss, and Tomoko was trying to calm her down.

I’ve been thinking of this strategy since I started flying up here… We can go on the offensive in a single line.

The witches of the misfits squadron formed a single line behind Katharine which resembled a centipede; and facing the direction of the Diomedia; started their offensive.

The Laros who had been guarding the Diomedia were being kept busy by the 1st squadron.

However…if the Laros can so easily leave the Diomedia in the open by itself… then that means it’s got nothing to worry about without them guarding it.

Its bulk was covered in an infinite number of turrets. As soon as you drew close to it, it spewed out so many bullets it was similar to having a rather deadly shower.

The ‘misfits’ squadron drew close in their single line formation… and were soon pelted with the ice-pop like bullets. Katharine, who was at the front, was taking all the hits.

“I can’t take this!”

“Everyone! Focus your shields at the front!”Tomoko shouted.

They were all protected by their magic fields. The shields that protected them from bullets and the temperature now formed in front of Katharine. The shields that the five of them produced were now out there in front of Katharine, protecting her.

We really haven’t done anything like this before…

“Well then Haruka, I’m counting on you.”

“G-Got it!” Haruka whimpered nervously.

Tomoko’s plan was as follows:

They would leave Katharine safe behind the five magic shields, and the Diomedia would approach…then, they would use Haruka’s 20mm calibre motor cannon to take down its frontal defense turrets. As far as appearances went, it would seem to be lightly armoured at the front. Despite being lightly armoured, there was no way that anything less than a 20mm calibre weapon could rip through the Diomedia’s frontal defense turrets.

Within the misfits squadron, the only unit that came with a 20mm motor cannon was Haruka’s A6M3 Model 22.

“I’m counting on you. Everything in this plan is riding on your motor cannon.”

The Diomedia drew steadily closer. The intensity of the machine gun fire began to increase. It began to feel as if they were in the middle of a blistering storm. The only difference between this and a storm was that it was bullets flying at them as opposed to rain.

“Gah! I’m almost at my limit!” Katharine shouted.

“Now!” Tomoko cried out.

Haruka leant across with the motor cannon in tow. Even though there was an obvious target she was supposed to hit…her field of vision became blurry.

She couldn’t get a good shot in.

“Ah!”

She pulled the trigger…and the cannon fired went completely off track. It wasn’t even remotely close to the nose of the Diomedia. Within the blink of an eye, the five of them had passed over the top of the Diomedia.

It was a failure.

“How could you possibly miss it from that distance!?” "How could you possibly miss it from that distance!?"

Tomoko yelled in disbelief at Haruka. “S-Sorry….” Haruka apologised tearfully.

“You better not miss the next one. It’s impossible to re-do this.”

“U-Understood…”

P/O Elma was the only one to notice something a little strange in Haruka’s doubtful speech. She placed the palm of her hand in front of Haruka’s eyes, and opened it, then closed it. Haruka started at it fixedly.

“Say…Sgt Haruka.”

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

“Could it be that…your eyesight’s a little off? As in, you’re short sighted?”

Everyone’s mouths dropped wide open at Elma’s realisation.

“Is that true, Haruka!?”

“Y-Yes…”She sighed, in a slightly troubled voice.

“For god’s sake Haruka, put some glasses on!”

“I can’t!” She yelled back.

“Why not!?”

“When I put glasses on… they make me look really ugly!”

Yet again, they stood there in awe of what Haruka was saying.

“Honestly…Do you have any glasses on you?”

Haruka fiddled around for a short while… “Yes, I’ve got some. I’m sorry,” she answered back.

“Put them on then!” Everyone shouted in time.

“I don’t want to!”

“Listen here, now’s not the time to worry about what you look like! This is a war you know, a war!”

“Be it a war or anything else, it’s simply unbearable to be ugly!”

Tomoko lost it completely at Haruka’s exclamation, and cried out at her: “Please put then on already! This is an order!”

Haruka shook her head in response.

“What the hell is wrong with you!? I’ll cut you if you don’t find a good reason! I really will cut you!”

Tomoko screamed as she gripped her katana with both hands. As she did so…

“Ah! Cut me! Please cut me! Ahh, It’s been a long-cherished ambition of mine to be cut by you, Pilot Officer!”

“Now you listen here…”

Just as Tomoko took a firmer grip on her katana to intimidate Haruka, she yelled suddenly.

“I-It’s because I like you!”

“Eh?”

“I like you, Pilot Officer Anabuki! Sorry, let me rephrase that… it’s more like love than like. I yearn for you; I respect you… I’m moving up to third dan with my love for you! Even so, the other day you stopped right in the middle of things, didn’t you, Pilot Officer? It was surely because you don’t find me attractive! Yes…that’s exactly it! If I put these glasses on, then that attraction will drop by half! You wouldn’t even want to look at me… I’d sooner die than have that happen!”

The members of the misfits squadron were bewildered by Haruka’s confession.

“Now you’re getting into lesbian territory!” Said Katharine.

“Y-You’ll go to hell!” P/O Elma added.

“You’ve got it all wrong! I am not a lesbian! Right Haruka? This a joke, right!?”

“I’m not joking… If you promise to sleep with me… I’ll put the glasses on!”

“Honestly you…”

As Tomoko stood trembling, Ursula drew close and spoke into her ear: “She told you to sleep with her.”

Tomoko’s trembling intensified.

Why does it have to be me…!? She felt frustrated.

“Just agree to it!” Katharine said.

“Well… given our current situation you can’t really do anything about it.” Elma was next.

“Fine, fine! I’ll do it! I’ll sleep with you!” Tomoko yelled.

“Really!?”

“I wouldn’t go back on my word to a girl.”

As she heard those words, Haruka reached into her pocket with a deep breath and pulled out a pair of gigantic glasses.

They were a pair of perfectly thick glasses.

She’s going to put those on? Goodness gracious, they really are huge… They’re so huge you could probably wear them underwater.

Tomoko snickered in a lowered voice.

“… Did you just laugh?”Everyone collectively drew closer to Tomoko.

“What! O-of course I-I didn’t laugh! Well then, let’s get moving!”

The five of them once again began their assault. It was the same plan as before – they would form behind Katharine and use her as a shield for Haruka's weapon.

The Diomedia drew closer.

400 metres, 300 metres… when it reached 200 metres, Haruka raised her head and placed her 20mm motor cannon on Katharine's shoulder.

The thick cartridge cases flipped out with a Don! Don! Don! The cannons had been sucked into the turret. The foremost shell entered into the turret, and then exploded.

"Good job!"

Haruka lined up her next shot, and that one hit too! She continued to shoot, and took down four of the turrets. There was now space to get above the Diomedia.

The distance was now 500 metres.

Haruka and Katharine withdrew.

"Ursula!" Tomoko shouted.

Ursula let out a sigh before launching the rocket she had been holding in both hands. The rocket launched with a dry 'Schpon!' noise. The rocket entered the Diomedia's body with a plume of white smoke. It exploded violently with a Boom! Leaving a clear hole dead in the centre of the Diomedia. However… the Diomedia was indeed very hardy, and continued to fly. "P/O Elma! Support me, full speed ahead!"

"Roger that!"

Tomoko grabbed onto Elma from behind, and used her to increase her acceleration.

"Uuuuooooooooooooooooooooo!"

Tomoko flew towards the hole where the rocket had burst the Diomedia. She straightened her body up and made the plunge, her katana gripped tightly in both hands.

“P/O Elma, pull off!”

Elma separated herself from Tomoko. With her katana ready, Tomoko flew into the open hole on the Diomedia. In an instant, her figure had disappeared inside the Diomedia…

The bulk of the Diomedia broke off. It burst into flames as bright as strobe lighting. In an instant, the piece that had been broken off heaved, before exploding completely.

The inside of the body was wreathed in flames from the explosion. Afterwards… the space that the Diomedia had been in was empty. Debris flew haphazardly at Haruka and the others, who hadn’t been near the explosion.

“Tomoko!”

“Pilot Officer Anabuki!” Haruka and the others screamed.

The Diomedia had been split into four pieces – all leaving behind a trail of white smoke…

For a second, there was dead silence…Even though it was only for a second, it felt like it had lasted for all eternity.

What had happened to Tomoko?

Everyone stood stunned, staring longingly at the cloud of white smoke.

“No way… and just as P/O Anabuki had promised that she’d sleep with me…”In the instant that Haruka spoke… a white figure shone from within the smoke.

“I’m alright.” They heard Tomoko’s voice over the wireless.

During the explosion… Tomoko had protected herself with her magic field. The remaining misfits gave an exuberant cheer.

Tomoko headed towards where her friends were so that they could return to base in formation.

“Pilot Officer Beurling… we took down our true enemy.” Tomoko whispered as she stared absent mindedly at the trail of smoke.

Epilogue

Dear Anabuki Tomoko,

Firstly, Happy New Year. I thought I'd start this with a New Year's greeting. Tomoko, have you been keeping well? I'm sure you're doing your absolute best. The battle in Karlsland today has been fierce. It was fierce yesterday, too. Despite the struggle, the Karlsland detachment I'm with have overwhelming fighting spirit. We were dispatched today to drive the Neuroi threat back. We managed to take down around 30 Neuroi of varying sizes. Even still, the Neuroi get stronger and stronger every day.

Well then… you probably hate me right now, don't you? Of course. I'm the reason that you ended up getting sent to Suomus. I want you to know that I didn't do that for my own gain. I thought that if you and I were together, you'd be too concerned about advancing your shoot-down count and would lose sight of the whole situation.

But… I have to say I'm relieved. I read the newspaper. I read about how you took down that huge Diomedia. We had no luck in taking it down, so it looks like that makes you number one. Congratulations. You must be really happy about it. I think it would have been impossible to take that thing down on your own. In other words, you must have made some special comrades. Friends that you can fly in line together with. I look forward to the day that we will be able to fly together again.

When that time comes, don't hold back; give it all you've got.

Please keep trying your best.

Suomus really is a freezing cold place, so try not to catch a cold. Well then, see you. Stay safe.

Until the day that we can battle together again,

Katou Takeko.

Tomoko stroked the letter longingly. It was a letter from Takeko, who was in Karlsland. Tomoko was genuinely happy that Takeko had written to her so that she could ease her negative thoughts.

The day before… there was one more new friend. They were standing there drinking coffee elegantly.

“What’s wrong? Is there something on my face?”

It was Beurling.

“No… it’s nothing like that. It’s just that… well I thought you were dead.”

“No-one said that I was ‘dead’. That was just something you made up in your head.”

Beurling continued to drink coffee with her usual uninterested expression adorning her face. She’d been shot down by the Diomedia and sustained serious injuries… but it hadn’t proved fatal. It was definitely P/O Elma’s fault that Tomoko had thought her to be dead. Despite that, Tomoko was brought back to her senses remembering the sense of companionship she had felt fighting against the Diomedia…

“You really are a twisted person.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“You’re Britannian, so you should be drinking tea right?”

“I drink tea too. I just think it tastes weak.”

Beurling drank the rest of her coffee down in one gulp. Tomoko lowered her head at Beurling.

“Thank you.”

Beurling said nothing. Then she spoke, shaking her head a little: “Well, I guess tea is good once in a while.”

Just then… The door slammed open suddenly, making a loud noise. Haruka

stormed into the mess hall – where Tomoko and Beurling had been talking.

“Pilot Officer Anabuki! You are a liar!”

Haruka stood there, her body covered in nothing but a bedsheet.

“You promised to sleep with me so I… I was lying alone, shrouded in darkness in the bedroom to invite you! To think that you’ve found a replacement, I can’t believe it!”

Tomoko squealed in embarrassment, her cheeks flustered.

Suddenly, F/L Mika Ahonen appeared from behind, leaping towards Haruka’s naked body to embrace her.

“Oh my! Don’t worry, I’ll join you! Our playtime is just beginning!”

“Please let go! Unhand me!” And just like that, Haruka was taken away.

“Is that alright?”Beurling asked.

“It’s not like I’ve lied to you, is it? If necessary, please forgive me. After all, it’s said in the orient that: ‘the end justifies the means’.”

Tomoko’s words were soon followed by the appearance of Katharine.

“Tomoko! We've got trouble!”

“You always seem to be in trouble, Liberion.”

“Ursula’s making a mess again! This time it’s a 50 kilogram explo-“

As soon as she spoke, the sound of a huge explosion echoed throughout the room.

“Ah, this is the third day in a row that’s she’s blown up that room...”

Pertaining to the success of her rocket, Ursula had graduated from simply reading all the time. She spent all her time conducting new experiments on rockets instead. She’d changed her focus from education to experiments.

“If she does it inside then it’s perfectly safe. Now bugger off.”

Beurling said in a cool voice.

I wonder if that girl really is safe… Tomoko murmured in a worried tone. As she did so, Ursula entered the room, her face completely blackened. Without saying a single word, she drank some water and left again. Katharine followed her out.

“Oh geez! At least do this stuff outside!”

The sound that came from the adjacent room was… the siren.

“Air raid warning. Air raid warning. A Neuroi bombing formation of about 40 units, at an altitude of 400 metres. Prepare to intercept.”

F/L Hakkinen’s chilling voice announced.

P/O Elma burst in after the announcement.

“Hey you guys! You can drink tea afterwards! We’re dispatching! I’ll go on ahead, hurry up and get ready!”Elma rushed ahead in a flurry.

“Shall we get going?” Beurling said as she stood up.

Tomoko smiled broadly as she too stood up.

“Say, Tomoko.”

“What is it?

“What’s your shoot down count?”

Tomoko looked as if she were in thought for a while, and then answered. “The squad’s shoot down count is 217 units!”

“Individually…?”

“I forgot!” Tomoko said with a bright smile adorning her face.

Tomoko and Beurling looked up at the Suomus sky.